WORLDS OF IF

science fiction

JANUARY 1976

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Galaxy

JOANNA RUSS

We Who Are About To...

Arsen Darnay • Spider Robinson • Steven Utley

J. E. Pournelle • Larry Niven

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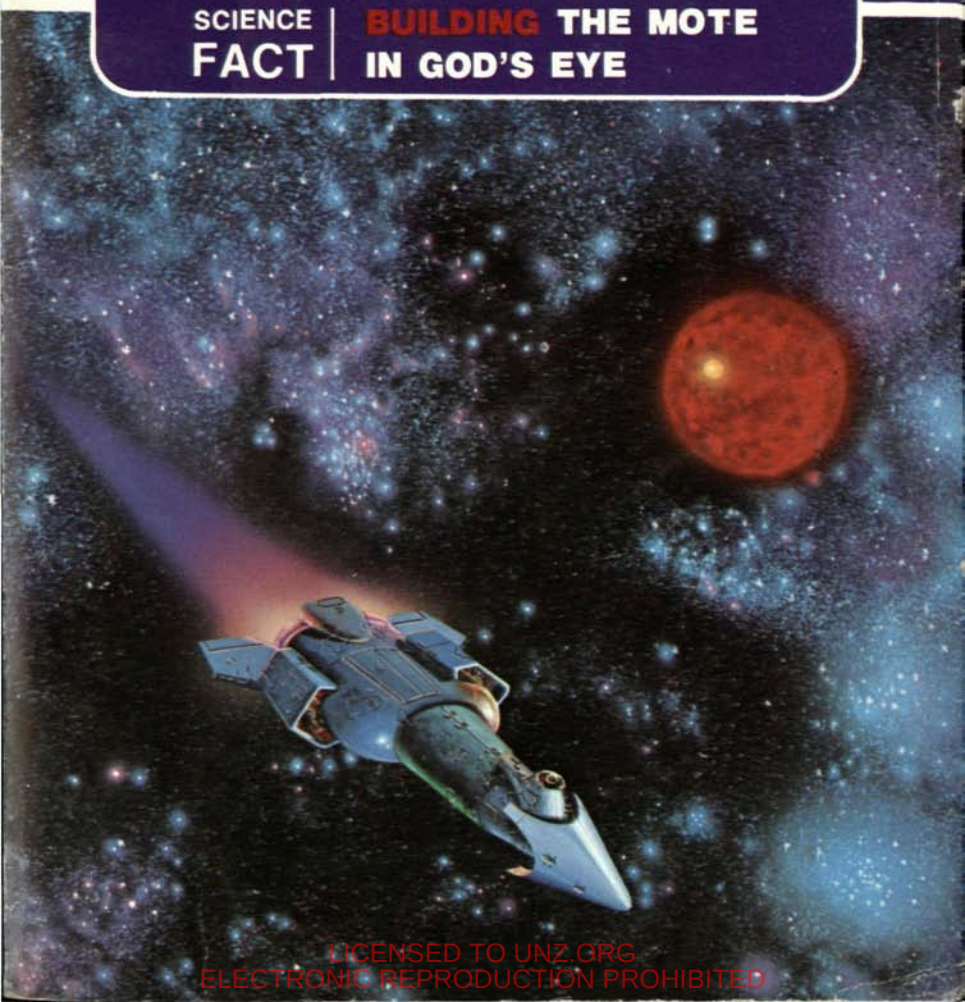

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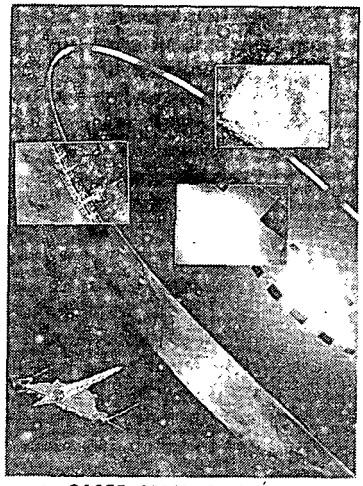

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Jan. 1976
Vol. 37, No. 1

Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION
MAGAZINE

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Cover by Rick Sternbach, from
BUILDING THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE

Interior illustrations by Ames, Bramley, Fabian, Freff, Pini

GALAXY, Incorporating *Worlds of IF*, is published monthly by UPD Publishing Corporation, a subsidiary of Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation. Arnold E. Abramson, President. Main Offices: 235 East 45 Street, New York, N.Y. 10017. Single copy: $ .95. 12-issue subscription: $11.40 in U.S., $13.00 elsewhere.

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FORUM

Arsen Darnay * THROUGH INNOCENT EYES

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FOR MANY YEARS I touched science fiction lightly—like a periodic comet visiting the solar system: I came around from time to time and glimmered briefly on the field's periphery.

This happened at airports, usually, on the hind leg of a trip, with the day's work done, the briefcase heavy, and my flight delayed somewhere by fog. Then I'd wander to the book racks looking for something good to read: for hope springs eternal.

At these times I had a strategy: to find that happy cross between the light and stimulating: nothing pretentious yet nothing vile, something for Technological Man: he plays in complex games and likes complex entertainment. When Eric Ambler couldn't be found or Le Carrée's latest was not yet out in paperback, I reached for science fiction.

Those were my days of purest innocence.

I knew nothing about a science fiction world, its issues, or personalities. When I bought a magazine, I skipped the "fact" and "letters" portions. I was after action, pure and simple. I assumed that all behaved like I did—authors, editors and readers: collaborating to produce or to enjoy that special brand of light entertainment: flights of projection into worlds that could well be.

Sometimes a book had an effect beyond the ordinary. Then I might speculate for a moment, surprised that profundity lay hidden in such froth. Perhaps science fiction writers used a greater canvas, I thought, admitted fewer impediments, and therefore they were better "dreamers." I knew and valued Jungian psychology which stipulates a racial Unconscious with transcendental qualities, and sometimes I saw science fiction as a kind of racial dreaming. At its best it projected images of possibility, lubricated us by compensations, and slipped past our sober censorship to show us at our best or worst. In short, it was a Rorschach blot of galactic proportions, better than other forms of "escape."

As this notion took root, I sometimes read a few current novels just to see what we were all dreaming: What do we fear? What are today's specifications for paradise?

If I had a hypothesis about the field, that was it. I guessed that science fiction's social value—beyond the laudable aim of entertainment, pure and simple; its nutritional content as opposed to its taste—lay in projecting alternatives to seek or shun. It was one of many channels by which psychic energies welled to the surface.

I neither knew about nor made any fine distinctions—between hard science fiction and the softer kind, between space opera and new wave. I had the casual reader's innocence, the supreme imperiousness of the consumer: if I liked it, it was good; if I didn't, it was bad.

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Good and bad, of course, meant specific things. Science fiction either had or lacked "reality" for me. The "real" is slippery and fades into the absurd when philosophers or physicists make it their target. I meant by that a common sense of "believability" but with one exception: I expected technical wizzardry, spatial and temporal expansions and foreshortenings, strangeness, and surprises. I didn't fuss much about the science. A tale could violate Boyle's law for all I cared. I was reading science *fiction,* not science. But even here I looked for plausibility. Seduction was fine but clumsy rape was rude.

I held the notion that science fiction was about people, first of all. For science, hard or soft, one went to the real source, not the entertainment literature. The human element, for me, was constant, the environment a variable. How would *I* behave in the topsy turvy setting? What would *I* do? What if *I* had a parasitic awareness in *my* head? What would *we* do when they landed?

This given, I had no tolerance for slippery psychology or ignorance of social behaviour. Nothing galled me more, after paying out a dollar, than cardboard figurines enacting some weighty speculation about matter. Vaguely articulated alien social systems, designed purely to deliver convenient plot incidents, could make me frown. Depictions of Congress by folk who'd never been on Capitol Hill, of military behaviour by persons who had obviously never studied military ways, of scientists who weren't in the slightest like the ones I'd worked with, superior beings that weren't superior, primitives who weren't primitive—all these and many more such phenomena left me feeling cheated: for the illusion of reality was shattered and the rest was cold porridge. After a string of so-so books or stories, I told myself that I'd outgrown the field. Either I knew too much to be seduced, or else the writers had grown clumsy.

Then, ever and again, I'd run into excellence: books like Herbert's *Dune* or Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar.* These occasional gems recalled earlier great experiences—like reading Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters,* to name a special favorite of mine. The real authors were obviously around, producing grand illusions worth the money, worth even all those other books I had left half read in the seat pockets of countless airplanes.

But nevertheless—and science fiction was a good trip for me as a reader—as time passed I grew more and more jaded, more and more irritable, and ever harder to satisfy. I was almost ready, put another way, to become a writer.

* * *

And thus the orbit of that occa-

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sional comet decayed toward the center. I came to see the mystery from closer up.

(Why and how a man becomes a writer is best left unexplored. Besides, there's nothing to it. Writing, as all authors will tell you, is simple and fun. The ideas come, you dash them off, and pop the pages in the mail. Three days later a breathless editor calls to say Yes! Soon you are rich and famous. That, in a nutshell, is the common experience.)

Before I had learned that lesson and still believed in needless struggle, I set to work with system to master the new environment. I began to read the magazines from cover to cover and learned that insiders called them "zines"—much as conferences were simply "cons." There were "issues" in the field (i.e. Is SF literature?). I learned to distinguish between readers, fans, aspirants (who wrote letters), Big Name Fans, writers, names, Names, Big Names, and Masters, these being the designations of ranks in the science fiction hierarchy back then. (Robert Heinlein had not yet received the Grand Master Nebula award; he was still slumming with the Asimov's and Clarke's and Pohl's.)

As yet, however, I hadn't met science fiction face to face—only through print, darkly.

Then one day an occasion presented itself. Our local county library announced a "workshop" on science fiction. A well-known editor and several authors would be present. A local college planned to tape the session for later classroom use.

I combed my beard and went to take the plunge.

The reference desk had yielded to a table with a water pitcher and a stack of styrofoam cups. (Later the authors would break those cups apart, bit by bit, or doodle on their sides while awaiting a turn to speak.) The camera crews were getting ready. The audience sat waiting.

But what an audience! They were so young. They were young but also earnest, intense, and uptight with expectations. For a second I saw myself hidden in the stacks watching the proceedings with half an eye, an open book in hand. Then I noticed one or two adults: a tanned suburban mother in sandals, a man with a red beard, a crewcut, greying fellow in a blue suit and tie. I sat down myself, a little ill at ease. What I had gleaned from letter columns seemed true: a motly following had science fiction.

Suddenly they came: the editor leading the authors. They wore sticky-backed name tags, their names in felt tip pen. I only remember Roger Zelazny because he wore a suit, seemed slightly bored, spoke sparingly, and gave a memorably worded, concise, and graphic description of the Nebula award—which he had earned and

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had been asked to explain. He gave a physical description while the question had probed the institution behind the thing. I sensed an irony and the fast play of invisible swords.

The editor opened his briefcase and laid on the table, fanned out like cards, several copies of the current issue of his magazine. He had surprised me by looking a touch countrified in cowboy boots. He was the chairman and host. The TV director signalled, the audience drew breath, and the show was on.

Then came a drill which, I later learned, is a *sine qua non* of science fiction gatherings: when the chair goes around the table to hear each man define what science fiction means to him—but so far as I am aware no one ever says: Well, last year it paid for new siding on the house and this year—*if* they reprint my *Kama Sutra Luna and* it does better than the last time—we'll give the old Dodge the heave-ho.

In fairy tales, just before the hero penetrates the secret cave to find the treasure or the princess, obstacles, alarms, and monsters rise before him on the narrow path.

Those on the inside of institutions have a way of frightening would-be joiners. I think they do it from an unconscious, biological, territorial urge.

Thus, science fiction having been defined, the panel turned to the future of the field, and now came a flood of negatives designed to discourage closer approach. I learned that things were in bad shape. Science fiction stumbled backwards in bleeding retreat, pressed by adverse economics, disintegrating distribution systems, a growing illiteracy, the encroachements of pseudo-science fiction writers like Vonnegut, the competition of TV, and academic smarty-pants wishing to crucify the genre on a cross of analysis.

So much for that "author's perch" on Spain's Costa Brava from whence one member of the audience had planned, later in the year, to start that steady march to noble Stockholm.

Close observation, engendered by the presentations, revealed that the authors did not look especially well fed. They were like people—which gave me hope but little comfort—tall, thin, overweight, young old. And Zelazny, of course, wrapped in relative silence.

At last the panel opened for questions. The questions were new to me but hindsight tells me they were standard, a part of the science fiction ritual like the dialogue between priest and congregation (*Dominus vobiscum. – Et cum Spiritu tuo.)*

—Did the editor like to see sword and sorcery? This came from a youngster, tall, dark, slender, pimply, with horrendous inkspots on his right index and middle fingers. By the time the editor had dealt with that, another aspirant had switched to origami.

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—Why did the science fiction field avoid the subject of sex? The questioner was in his twenties. He wore a beard and ''sat'' slouched on his chair. You might say that his back was sitting; his rears hung free.

The editor began, defensively, and several authors signalled that they, too, wanted a crack at that.

We learned that authors ''put in'' or ''used'' sex whenever it was appropriate. The days of sexless science fiction were gone for good—together with bug-eyed monsters.

I had a vision of an author before a shelf of little bottles. One bottle is labelled ''sex.'' He takes it down, uncaps and sniffs it, grins lewdly, and ca-a-a-a-a-refully lets one drop! fall into the boiling pot. . . .

(For some readers, I've learned to my benefit, it's quite sufficient to wave the open bottle in the rising steam. That way you get to keep and use the sex at home.)

Next question?

—Who, in the panel's opinion, a questioner behind me wanted to know, was the greatest science fiction writer of all time and—*and,* more specifically, would the panel say whether they thought that Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love* measured up to the rest of Heinlein's work.

Now came a bandying of names. None of the panelists claimed the honor, and those named were not around to defend themselves. It was agreed, however, that *Time Enough for Love* should not be held against ''Bob.'' What about Ursula LeGuin, a young woman in glasses asked apropos of nothing. The panel went off on a side trip about the feminist issue—in response more to the young woman's tone than her question.

At last it broke into a reception with punch and cookies. But I didn't stay.

* * *

Some time after that my name appeared in print and my interest in science fiction (the ''insider's world) grew. I joined the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) and in moments of procrastination studied the group's little yellow newsletter. Much was made of an astonishing controversy between Joanna Russ and Arthur Clarke on the subject of unconscious male chauvinism, which I found amusing. As for the rest. .?

I was no longer the rank outsider now, nor yet completely in, the well known ''dangerous'' stage, a silly season. And so, weakened and stimulated simultaneously, I visited one of the Cons.

My initial forays into the field, bolstered by closer reading of fan letters, had started me thinking that science ficition, in one of its dimensions at least, was a kind of cult. I meant to check that hypothesis by visiting a conference.

My reasoning along these lines

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had had its origin in an article on "consumption communities" I'd read years ago. Daniel Boorstin, writing in *Fortune* in 1967, spoke of the fellowship of Doublemint chewers, J&B Scotch drinkers, Chevrolet sports car drivers, and the like: loose communities based on a togetherness in consumption.

I had thought about that concept from time to time and had found it to be true. As the great "monocultures" were evidently losing their power (Christianity, Islam), they seemed to be replaced by other concepts of value and organization based on economic or emotional dominants. I couldn't help thinking that we were reverting back to totem cults for lack of a higher vision. Could science fiction be one of those totems? Was it a specialized youth cult—an heretical way to socialize turned-off kids, to assimilate them to the post-Technological age?

Seeing is believing. Once more I waded into the surf.

Let me use an author's right to obscure the particulars of space and time. Nor will what I shall write be true in the strictest sense. I'm after an impression, not a report.

The event was called the Concon—at least initially. Held in a very big city (no, not *that* big), in a grand old hotel, it offered the usual smorgasboard: speeches, dinners, a guest of honor, a huckster room, exhibits, receptions, readers, fans, aspirants, writers, names, Names, Big Names, and even a Master or two. Also: editors, agents, a delegation from the Planet of the Apes, publishers, actors, astronauts, and little old ladies in tennis shoes. The registration fee made you gulp if—under-estimating the power of science fiction—you came with a single ten-dollar bill in your billfold. And the scene blew your mind if—until that time—you hadn't seen a cult in its swarming.

Imagine now the grand ballroom filled with people. Try not to look too obviously at the young women dressed in the merest of scarves, scarves that seemed to hold moist balls of trembling dough. Concentrate instead on beaded blue denim jackets depicting Saturn and other planets, the "I Love Hugo Gernsback" belt buckles, the Batman T-shirts, and apes smoking cigarettes. Better yet, sit down, already, and keep the eyes on the platform up front, the dark walls of gold-laced mirrors, the half-dimmed chandeliers.

The microphone was ticklish and bitchy and screamed horrendously under the jerky hand of someone hard to see. At last we were under way: Introductions. Then came an address. The words echoed about and were difficult to understand. Next to me a young man in heavy socks and tremendous hiking boots took crackers from his backpack and began his breakfast.

It was mid-morning when the key (unscheduled) event took place. By

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now a panel had taken over. They discussed the work of some sage who claimed that earth and Venus had once collided to help Moses part the red sea. Emotions ran high. Evidently one was either for or against the sage. Even those who claimed to have an open mind were either pro or con—something they did not realize but an innocent like me could readily discern.

Then there was a hullaballoo in the back. Heads turned. The flow of talk at the head table slowed. Suddenly a little man marched in. He swept the crowd with a single, imperious glance and cut a pose: arms outstretched to the side, his legs apart. *I am here,* he seemed to say; *look, it is I!*

He had a face that might have been cherubic once but now was lean. A beret sat tilted on his head. He wore a parka on top and tight-fitting, bell-bottomed, purple slacks below. I couldn't see his shoes.

Many individuals rose and made their way toward the man. In the rush of sound I could not make out what anyone said, but I caught the phrase that he—whoever *he* might have been—must have come in on the Red Eye.

For a moment the little man was overwhelmed by the admiring wave. Then I saw him again, struggling to free himself—shaking hands, patting backs, embracing girls—but ever striving toward the platform.

Soon he was there. The panel shrunk back as he mounted the steps. In the electric atmosphere this entrance had engendered, the sage was forgotten for a moment—not Venus but Jupiter himself seemed to have collided with the science fiction world. He took the microphone from the podium attachment—the podium itself would have hidden him from view—and stepping to the side he said that. . .

. . .Elfin wings had brought him tither just in time to rescue this schlampig conference from the doldrums. Con-con was not a proper name for such a convention. It dated the field and brought to mind legs kicking in rythmic union. No, indeed. A new name would have to be found, now he was here.

What name? someone called from the floor.

The Harley-con! the little man announced.

And amidst laughter, cheers, and wild, exuberant applause, all those present seemed to approve the name by acclamation.

* * *

Thus I beheld one of the cult

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gods, a Big Name at the least. To anyone imbued with even a smidgin of ambition, it was a dangerous vision indeed! It hinted at rewards unguessed at before: fame, public acclaim, the intoxicating embrace of sound from the floor below, the psychic ocean, whose waves one imperious gesture could still, whose energies could be roused to storm proportions by a single call. . . .

The session ended eventually and we expanded, like hot gas, to take in the rest of Harley-con.

Those masses of people, the constant churning motion in the halls; the booths; the detritus of displays collecting in corners; the tired fans resting on the floor, backs against walls; the tight, fannish clumps seeking autographs around invisible Masters: all this exhilarated and frightened that part of me which responds to dreams.

I wandered about.

Here, in a room, a writer with a striking name—Tarantula Crusoe, I think it was—sang funny songs to the accompaniment of his guitar. I sat for a while watching Captain Kirk on a screen.

Then came an editors panel, and I sat down to listen. The table cloth was red. One editor was smug, the others bled. I recognized my friend from the county library. He dodged rotten eggs having to do with a 25-cent reading charge. The second editor tried his best to stop a vicious sally from the floor led by a phalanx of unpaid writers. At best it was a draw: the writers drew blood. A third one complained about the price of paper. The fourth one looked surprised and wondered out loud what the fuss was all about.

I wondered, in turn, which of the four enjoyed the highest circulation, and I would've bet it was the fourth.

Somehow it all came out all right, at the end—else by then I had become accustomed to the wall of negations. Experience said that publishers paid fast or slow, depending; not much, but they paid. Paper was dear, but they kept printing on it. And to an aspirant, hungry for fame, what's a quarter, anyway?

On the way out I saw a Master: a leonine head, flowing grey hair. For the moment he was almost alone. He stood chatting amiably with two stupendous ladies.

I hesitated, well within his aura. Should I intrude and shake his hand? What will I say? "Sir, back in the '50's I enjoyed your robot stories. Terriffic stuff"? What had I read that was more recent? All that came to me was a detective short-story whose plot had turned on a lost button.

He who hesitates is lost. The autograph hunters had caught up. I said good-bye to Harley-con, reflecting that I would never make much of a fan.

On my windshield a ten-dollar parking ticket flapped in the humid breeze. So much for the magnetism of science fiction authors.

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* * *

On the way home I mused about that mass of youth I'd seen, the cult god on the platform, the conversations I had overheard. People over thirty had been conspicuous by absence. Yet such folk were reading the stuff. Had they been teenage disciples too, once upon a time? Were they *living* the science fiction they'd read about in puberty? Would these youngsters end up living the stuff we wrote?—not literally, of course, but subtly changed and adapted to reality?

If it is a cult, I told myself, it might have its value: a chrysalis from which will crawl, well-conditioned to withstand tomorrow's future shock, a new generation of the post-technocracy—or whatever.

By the time I reached home, the speculative fever had died down somewhat. Hypothesis, I told myself: just another hypothesis, another attempt to horn an irrational phenomenon into the utilitarian shoe.

The fans were there because they pleased; the writers wrote because they pleased; it was nothing more profound. . . .

Some time after that I tried to transmute my experience into an ironic story about a fan. The Harley-con would be in it, of course, and plenty of weird far-out types—and a score of middle-aged writers trying to foist off their worn-out military and sexual fantasies on the young in a coating of science.

That, too, is an aspect of the field, of course, but I get skittish about boxes, and so that little enterprise died a quiet death. *Requiescat in pacem.*

* * *

My next and last encounter with the science fiction world—aside from writing and all that goes with it—was a Nebula dinner in a very big city (yes, *that* city).

I went in part from necessity. With a name like mine, even in science fiction circles it is difficult to gain credibility. I wanted to prove that I was the real thing, no mere pseudonym.

This affair caught me by surprise. After Harley-con, I had expected this gathering to be a psychedelic happening squared. But I should have known better. Only writers come to Nebula affairs, and the priests are not the congregation; they wear black robes, stiff collars, and inhabit the quiet inner courtyards of meditation.

Everything was simple, measured, and dignified. I felt at ease in my blend-in organization-man clothes. I was among professionals and recognized the atmosphere.

Close up and relaxed—the unruly constituencies held at bay by invisible bars—the people at the center of science fiction gave me a good impression. I found the writers open,

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friendly, and self-contained.

I had expected more animosity, frankly.

In the letter columns of SFWA's circular, I had encountered the most juvenile sort of rubbish imaginable: thoughtless effusions, petty carping, clumsy clowning, lockerroom humor, and plain stupidity: distasteful to an innocent who looks at writing (even "funny" writing) as a serious matter.

Little of that sewage-stream surfaced on Nebula Day—though there were a few false notes, of course. I sensed the jostle of egos now and then, especially during dinner after a few drinks. The SFWA meeting was a typical union affair. Publishers were not especially popular. There were camps within the tribe, vaguely defined (for me) but real enough. The dominant tone overcame the noise, however, all in all.

The highlight of the evening was the first award of the Grand Master Nebula, larger in size than the regular award. It went to Robert Heinlein, a trim, bullet-headed venerable of the field. He was genuinely touched as we all rose to give him a standing ovation. Something ended that evening: the completion of an edifice—pyramid-shaped, of course. The final stone had been placed on top and the hierarchy was complete.

I looked about at the tightly-packed tables surprised a little at finding myself there, in the inner circle—albeit at its outer edge: men and women of all ages. The glistening Nebulas were carried off, one by one. Laughter rolled and shoptalk buzzed. Despite the formal dress some wore, the beatnik threads of others, I saw ordinary craftsmen all about and understood it all a little better: here was science fiction as a profession or a trade (take your pick), and this affair was an association meeting. The creators of imaginary empires were like—well, no more flamboyant, say, than a West Coast contingent of electrical engineers.

A big, crowded reception followed dinner. It went on and on, well past my bedtime. The next morning, a bright and empty Sunday, I caught a plane home.

* * *

Some time has passed now, but on the subject of science fiction I remain an innocent still—despite these near-encounters with the mystery. And I'm fairly sure I'd prefer to stay that way. Much can be made of nothing much on the one hand; and on the other profundities turn banal on close examination. Science fiction is both of these and neither.

It's best for me, as writer and as reader (though I don't urge this on anyone else), to take it like it comes. Definitions will never hold water in the arts, though there are countless busy potters patching the container. Nothing dies so quickly as on a vivisection table, and I prefer to run about free in the valleys and on the hills. ★

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WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO...

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Even if one must die, still
it is better to die trying—
but trying to do what?

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ABOUT TO DIE. And so on.

We're all going to die.

The Sahara is your back yard, so's the Pacific Trench: die there and you won't be lonely. On Earth you are never more than 13,000 miles from anywhere, which as the man said is a tough commute, but the rays of light from the scene of your death take little more than a tenth of a second to go. . .anywhere!

We're nowhere.

We'll die alone.

This is space-travel: Imagine a flat world, a piece of paper, say, with two spots on it but very far apart. If you were a two-dimensional triangle, how would you get from one spot to the other? Walk? Too far. But fold the paper through the third dimension (ours) so that the spots match exactly—if you were a triangle you couldn't see or feel this, of course—and you *are* at the proper place. We do this in the fourth. Don't ask me how. Only you must be very, very careful, when you fold spacetime, not to sloosh the paper around or let it slide: then you end up not on the spot you wanted but God knows where, maybe entirely out of our Galaxy, which is that dust you see in the sky on clear nights when you're away from cities. The glittering breath of angels. Far, far from home. The light of our dying may not reach you for a thousand million years. That ordinary sun up there, a little hazy now at noon, that smeary spot.

We do not know where we are.

At dawn there was an intensely brilliant flash far, far under the horizon, and about an hour later the noise of the thing; I figured the way you do for thunderstorms, the lag between light and sound: one-hippopotamus, two-hippopotamus, three-hippopotamus, four-hippopotamus, five-hippopotamus—there's your mile. Seven hundred miles. That's over a thousand kilometers. In the event of mechanical dysfunction, the ship's computer goes for the nearest "tagged" planet, i.e. where human life is supposed to be possible, then ejects the passenger compartment separately. Lays an egg, you might say. We won't be visited without a distress call, however, now the colonization fever's died down (didn't take long, divide five billion people by twenty and the remainders start getting clubby again).

Goodbye ship, goodbye crew, goodbye medicine, goodbye books, goodbye freight, goodbye baggage, goodbye computer that could have sent back an instantaneous distress call along the coordinates we came through (provided it had them, which I doubt), goodbye plodding laser signal no faster than other light that might have reached somewhere, sometime, this time, next time, never. You'll get around to us, say in a couple of thousand years.

We're a handful of persons in a metal bungalow: five women, three men, bedding, chemical toilet, simple tools, an even simpler pocket laboratory, freeze-dried food for six months, and a water-distiller with its own sealed powerpack, good for six months (and cast as a unit, unusable for anything else).

Goodbye, everybody.

At dawn I held hands with the other passengers, we all huddled to-

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gether under that brilliant flash, although I hate them.

O god, I miss my music.

* * *

(This is being recorded on a pocket vocoder I always carry; the punctuation is a series of sounds not often used for words in any language: triple gutturals, spits, squeaks, pops, that kind of thing. Sounds like an insane chicken. Hence this parenthesis.)

Of the women: myself. A Mrs. Valeria Graham, actually married to Mr. Graham, in the delicate fifties when alimony becomes mandatory upon divorce (who would pay whom is a conjecture here). Valeria Victrix habitually wears the classical Indian sari, usually gold embroidered on royal blue, like a television hostess's; this does not suit a petite chemical blonde. Ditto the many-splendored earrings: bells within cages within hoops.

A dark young woman who does yoga on her head, off to some "unimportant job" somewhere (she said), hates everyone, says she's called Nathalie. Nathalie what? Nathalie nothing. Mind your own business.

Cassie, thirty-ish, beginning to put on weight; you'll find her waiting table in any restaurant or nude bar on any world. She looks like an earlier stage in the life-cycle of Mrs. Graham, but that's an illusion; nothing but a convulsion of nature could let either or these two rise or fall to the other's level. (Hydrogen fusion, which provided unlimited power and should've made us all rich, but of course didn't.)

A Graham child, female, fourteen, a beautiful café-au-lait so she is either Mrs. Graham's by a former marriage or Mr. Graham's ditto, or neither. Hors de combat all trip with one of the few bacterial diseases left, or rather the treatment for it, which had made her dreadfully ill. We'd see her only when she'd stagger into the lounge, looking beautiful and hopeless, and then vomit (again). For whoever finds this and has no Greek, an iatrogenic disease is one created by the physician and we have plenty of them. The physicians and the diseases.

This will never be found.

Who am I writing for, then?

The men: Mr. Graham, a big powerful male in his early fifties, hollow and handsome in the same style as his wife: coloring, dress, and person. Three days out (we were on the way to find the first spot we can then fold onto the second spot) Cassie took off the mask, stopped being squeezably-soft, and lost all expression. The Grahams stopped speaking to her. I say "male" because he emphasizes it subtly, so perhaps she's the buyer and he's the bought. Or both: money marries money. Relations with men are still apt to be patterned on a few rather dull models, especially among strangers, so I know less about the men than I do about the women, but in one way I know more: I mean the conception of themselves they find it publicly necessary to live up to.

Alan: a young man with a set of shoulders like unto those of one who plays *le fùtbol* (says he did). Extremely polite and attentive, with a carefully intent way of listening to

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everybody and agreeing civilly and much too often ("Oh, I do agree with you, Mr. Graham, I really do").

My theory is that this obviously insincere behavior conceals absolutely nothing; he's rich enough to take the poor man's Grand Tour, poor enough to need a job, decent enough not to hurt anyone unless he's frightened or hurt himself (which could happen pretty easily), and anxious enough to flatter whomever he thinks can help him. The Grahams, you see, are slumming.

An historian of ideas traveling from one University to another and extremely evasive about his work, as they all are, now there's so little of it to go around; he wears Mr. Graham's kind of conservative clothes: shorts and sport-shirts, bright but not daylight-fluorescent (Vic Graham in blue, John Ude in red). The only historical analogy to Alan's costumes is Graustark, all gold braid, epaulettes, and boots (except the shako, which I think he had to leave behind on account of the weight, though he never mentioned it). The professor is John Ude. Thirties. A very minor intellectual. Bland. Often displays The Smile. The first day, in the lounge, when Mrs. Graham actually introduced herself as *Mrs. Graham*—which is rather like presenting yourself as a Dame of the British Empire or a Roman Tribune—Professor Ude displayed (after a blank moment) The Smile. Then he took out from his sporran The Pipe, gesturing at The Pipe with The Smile to show that he was aware of his own self-mockery. He would have received Valeria as Mistress Anne Bradstreet, had she so required, because the Grahams are rich. Black-body-suited, perpetually angry Nathalie said audibly, "*Missiz*! Oh God," and turned away with an unbelieving, outraged, I knew-it-was-going-to-be-one-of-those-trips look.

Alan gaped hysterically, then shut his mouth. I said nothing. Think of it: Valeria and Victor in blue, Ude in red, Alan indescribable, Cassie in two stars and a cache-sexe (both silver), and Lori Graham in body paint, mostly blue (to match her parents' clothes). The arrows of Professor Ude's irony point only down in the social scale, never up; when they occasionally point at himself, he is very careful to blunt them.

Oh, we are a dull bunch! The professor once uncrimped enough to get into a long discussion with Victor Graham about the new lease of life given capitalism by the unlimited power of hydrogen fusion, the poor fool. He believes in free enterprise, competition, achievement-orientation, the meritocracy. He's never been behind the crew panels where the technocrats live. Travel enough and you can make friends with the crew, what's this, what's that, ask questions; they even let you fiddle about in sick bay if you're careful. You see things, then, if you're careful.

Meritocracy? We're being kept off the streets, that's all, rich or poor. (Foundations pay me to lecture on music and play tapes of it; that's why I travel. I'm a scrounge.)

I once said to Ude, "How fast do you think things really change?"

He said, "That's not my field."

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Cassie, determined, bitter, exhausted, full-breasted, wanted to know what a musicologist was and what kind of music.

"Very old," I said. "European twelfth century to Baroque. No farther."

"How nice," Mrs. Graham said. "We must tell Lori."

"Who cares," Cassie said.

I wear body-suits and sandals, like Nathalie, and keep a low profile, especially with passengers. This isn't a luxury liner; you don't have to eat with anybody, just dial a meal out of the locker.

And visit the crew. And envy them.

Behold the new irrelevants: parasites, scum, proles, scroungers. People who do nothing real.

No, dinosaurs.

Isn't. . .wasn't, I mean, a luxury liner.

Stranded dinosaurs.

* * *

Day first. I'm sitting in the corner of the empty tool chest after a little nap. Already excited talk of "colonization," whatever that is. Our tiny laboratory tells us the air is safe, although perhaps a little thin; there's nothing directly poisonous outside. Nathalie's unexpected talent for cataloguing and arranging tools (which is why the tool box is empty). The sun up for at least fifteen hours, taking a slow tour of the horizon at what my childhood tells me is 4 P.M. late autumn, so we have either a very great axial tilt or are in very high latitudes. A few weeks' observation and perhaps we can guess if we're approaching the summer solstice or going the other way, which could give us some idea of how long the seasons will be: could be ten years of summer (and it's hot outside now, about 30° C, they tell me). Through the window you can see ordinary green trees, hilly up-and-downish but not much, some little natural clearings. Very much like New Jersey a hundred and thirty-five years ago, when my ancestors came to Ellis Island: about nineteen-aught-five that was. My naternal something-great-grandfather was a plumber, my maternal something-great-grandmother a sheitel-maker. (A sheitel is a wig which Orthodox Jewish women used to wear after marriage, over their shorn hair. But what do you care.) We don't remember the actual genealogy of the other side nearly so far back, but I've inherited their looks: little, dark, Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish frontier at night with rubies, emeralds, and uncut diamonds sewn into the hems of their cloaks. At least I like to think of them that way. I carry the modern equivalent, the only currency that passes everywhere, sewn into my jacket, my neckband, my belt, so flat you couldn't detect it. I mean a whole pharmacopoeia. Because you never know what you will need. (I flicked a little from the ship, too: nothing important.)

Our equipment isn't good enough to test whether the life here is edible. We're not supposed to do that. Commonly the problem has been people contaminating the planet, but there have been instances of vice-versa. We're supposed to stay inside.

Everybody is getting on everybody else's nerves.

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Victor, in his hearty, overemphasized, hollow voice: "I believe I should." (Tail end of a conversation about who's to go out first. Not that it matters. We either go out eventually or cut our throats.)

"Why?" says Nathalie instantly.

"Because I'm old. Expendable. Why else?" (Lori Graham is looking adoring and anxious.)

"Very sensible," says Nathalie. "So should Mrs. Graham." (Lori outraged.)

"Well, if there's any harm. . ." This is John Ude.

"The Grahams will go," says Nathalie, over her shoulder, and continues putting together our shovels, our hammers, our axes—"half an hour, no less, no more"—and something longer that comes in sections.

The Grahams go out the air-lock, Victor stooping, Alan kindly restraining Lori when she tries to slip out with them. They have an intense, whispered conversation with Lori close to tears.

"My, you *are* just an ordinary traveler, aren't you!" I say to Nathalie, hoping to get a rise from her, maybe learn something. No answer. She's engaged in jointing together what we both realize at the same instant is a single-passenger hovercraft: sealed motor, no cab, kicks up so much dust that you have to wear an air-filter (included in the box; by Saint George, I was right), flies over any terrain with ease, including water (at under 32 kph, however), and looks like nothing so much as a stick with a saddle; hence its name.

"A br—" (she catches herself).

"Broomstick," I finish. On her knees, in the midst of spare parts, in her black skin-tights, Nathalie gives me (for a moment only) a glance of shock, of wild surmise—*are you one, too?*

"Where were you really going?" I say.

She inspects her fingernails, comes to a quick decision, licks her lips wolfishly.

"Government trainee," she says in a low voice but so naturally, that is to say pretend-naturally, that Cassie (who is lying on a bunk, holding to one ear a cheap, battery-powered music library that will wear out within days, I can tell) can't hear us.

"At what?" say I.

"Doesn't matter," she says sharply. "Not to tell. And I shan't now, not because it matters but because it doesn't."

For a moment she's a death's-head.

Then "What!" says Lori Graham, a little desperately, with the natural irritation of someone whose Mummy and Daddy may, after all, have been eaten by megatheria. "Nothing," answers Nathalie. "Go on screwing with Alan or whatever it is you were doing." (Lori makes a disgusted face and Alan turns aside to blush or giggle.) "If he can," she adds. In the low, trained voice, she says to me, "Who are you."

"A musicologist," I say. "Sorry. Nobody like you. I've picked things up because I've traveled a lot, that's all."

Cassie sits up, shaking her *radio*. She says to Nathalie, "Can you do something with this thing?"

"The batteries are worn down

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and they're electric; we can't recharge them. You've been playing that ever since we started this trip and you've probably played it before, quite a lot. I know you've recharged them but the case is worn. So that's probably two hundred hours and a couple of rechargings; they do deteriorate each time, you know. And there's nothing we can do—our gadgets are all sealed and shielded. It's a different kind of energy; we can't transform the one to the other. Besides if we tried opening any of the powerpacks, we'd probably go boom, you know, just like the ship." This is me. I add, "I'm awfully sorry, Cassie."

"So if you're a goddamn music student," says Cassie at her most insulting, "where's your goddamn music, huh?"

I'm tempted to answer "in the ionosphere" (reduced to its constituent atoms or even smaller pieces) but I say, "It was in the baggage compartment."

"Oh," says Alan, clearly disappointed. I guess he has been planning on hearing some music. Cassie draws up her knees in the bunk, exasperated, and presses the side of her face against the sealed window.

Alan adds in a friendly way, "Hey, don't you have any of it with you?" Forgetting to be polite, that one.

"Tapes," I say. "Want to use them for ribbons? I have the amplifier and the recorder—see? they fit in my hand—but the speakers are too big. Two meters diameter."

He opens his mouth, probably to inquire why a speaker has to be two meters across, but Lori—who is *very* well educated, as her parents have been telling us for three weeks—breaks in importantly with a disquisition on the physical reproduction of sound, and how the lowest musical note that can be heard by the human ear is 14 cycles per second and the lowest sounds that can be felt are even lower, and if you want a really good bass, say for Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor for Organ, or Vestal's Electronic Mass, you just have to have these enormous speakers for your sound environment because otherwise the sounds just won't fit mechanically on the speakers. "Literally," she says.

"O-o-oh," says Alan in mock awe.

Cassie breaks in furiously with, "Your goddamn education—"

(John Ude has been asleep all this time, worn out, poor man; that's why you haven't heard from him.)

Thank God the Grahams come back in. The air-lock jams. We are now testing the atmosphere just as much as they, something Mr. Ude (waked by the noise of Lori's rejoicings and questionings) seems to notice, but nobody's going to call attention to such things in the presence of an hysterical twelve-year-old with the habit of psychosomatic vomiting. (Her Momma says.)

Joy all around.

(I'm not, of course, recording this at the time it happened. I stole half-an-hour from the long, long dawn. Two and a half hours of twilight, then three more of real dark, and again two and a half hours of dusk-turned backward: slow, creeping, endless, unadvancing grey.)

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We're very high on the world's shoulder. Labrador perhaps. Even with the Pole circle. If the sun goes lower, if it sets closer to the place of its rising, if the dark shrinks, if red-sunset evolves without darkness into red-sunrise. Is this Spring? Summer? Fall? We might be heading into a ten-month summer, a twenty-year summer. Desert? Everything dead, brown, burned? Think anyway of midwinter with the sun even lower and only three hours of daylight out of twenty-eight. A night twenty-five hours long.

In the brief, black, real dark we all went outside to look at the sky. A shiver of the nerves as the night air struck us, a kind of blind claustrophilia, wishing to get back into our own, closed-in, stale smell, away from the living odors of night coolness. Everyone stayed together. Black velvet, must be overcast; this awful sense of being outside. Vast space.

We looked up.

Nothing.

I mean there was almost nothing in the sky: a few bright stars near the zenith and halfway to the equatorial horizon a far, faint, dim blur. Island universes. From anywhere on Earth (they say) you can see about three thousand stars with the naked eye. You can also see that arch of powder which we call the Milky Way; it's the center of the galaxy. We're located in one of its arms; it's a kind of flattened ellipse. From anywhere near any galaxy, unless one is very far above or below its major plane, and in the wrong hemisphere to boot, you ought to be able to see something. Not that it matters, of course, for space travel. Still. Nothing matched the star maps Nathalie had (she would!) but then on the other side of the equator, who knows? And none of us is very good at this sort of thing. But six stars and a blur. . .which might be, God knows, the Crab Nebula or our own, or unidentified astronomical object number goodness-knows-what, something so far away (as I said) the light of our dying will reach you (whoever you are) only after you yourselves are long dead, after your own Sun has engulfed you and then shrunk to a collapsed cinder with no more light in it than what we saw that night.

Whoever, wherever, whenever.

Lori cried in her mother's arms. Mrs. Graham very clumsy at comforting her daughter, perhaps always was. John the professor of the history of ideas saying something like "Uh!" low, a sort of groan.

That empty.

Well, we might be visited in a routine check of the tagged worlds in as little as a couple of centuries, a century, eighty years even. Even little Lori will be dead.

John Ude said, "Come on now, come on, dears. It's a tagged planet. It has to be. Too much coincidence otherwise, eh? The air, the gravity. Now if it's tagged, that means it's like Earth. And we know Earth. Most of us were born on it. So what's there to be afraid of, hey? We're just colonizing a little early, that's all. You wouldn't be afraid of Earth, would you?"

Oh, sure. Think of Earth. Kind old home. Think of the Arctic. Of Labrador. Of Southern India in June. Think of smallpox and plague

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and earthquakes and ringworm and pit vipers. Think of a nice case of poison ivy all over, including your eyes. Status Asthmaticus. Amoebic dysentery. The Minnesota pioneers who tied a rope from the house to the barn in winter because you could lose your way in a blizzard and die three feet from the house. Think (while you're at it) of tsunamis, liver fluke, the Asian brown bear. Kind old home. The sweetheart. The darling place.

Think of Death Valley. . .in August.

* * *

Day two. It began. I just couldn't keep my damned mouth shut. Everybody running around cheerily into the Upper Paleolithic. We're going to build huts. We're going to have a Village Fire that Lori Graham will tend because she is the Fire Virgin or something. Mrs. Graham is suddenly person-of-least-value. Victor says, "Excuse me, dear," with immense firmness and then goes about his business. He's going to go somewhere with John Ude to search for water. They won't drink it, of course, but will carry back samples and then we will analyze it, which is impossible, because we don't have the equipment. But it will certainly help the water-distiller; our tanks are almost empty. Mrs. Graham has suddenly become very cuddly with Lori, who keeps squirming away, saying, "Valeria, *please*!" With twenty-five hours of daylight there's no rush, and besides we have to move everything outside (to find out if that will kill us). Outside it goes, mattresses and bedding (to get rained on or infested), tools and tool-kit, all of this superficially showing immense order but in fact about as rational as the ooze of algae from a pond. Our nice, destructible laboratory (like litmus paper, use it once and it's done for) has told us that the sun will not burn us, although it has a small amount of ultra-violet, and more than the usual infra-red (too low in the sky, anyhow); that the local vegetation does not contain mineral poisons; that the (local) air does not, either; and that the gravitation is 0.93, which is so close to terrestrial as makes no difference.

Nathalie's digging experimental sanitation pits with a collapsible shovel. And every once in a while it does.

I seek out Ude, who's unpacking the first-aid kit, and say, "Benzedrine and bobby-pins!" but the joke's too old for either of us to have ever heard it, and too vulgar, base, and popular for him to have ever read it.

I say, "Look, you've got an anti-pyretic, two wide-spectrum antibiotics, pain-killers, and a nice little pamphlet about how to make a splint out of a bunk-rail. *It's not enough.*"

"We'll make do," he said heartily, flashing The Smile.

I said, "My God, man, what will you do when Lori's wisdom teeth come in?" and the child, who must have clairaudience (she was a good five meters away) instantly emitted a nervous "What!" and came over to join us. She had been watching Alan Bobby Whitehouse ponder about trying to start to learn to just

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possibly swing an axe without cutting his own foot.

"Your impacted wisdom teeth," I said. "*Everybody* gets impacted wisdom teeth. I'm the only adult I know whose wisdom teeth came in straight. Of course I had gingivitis, and dental surgery, and fillings, and your mother has transplants. So where are we going to get all this?"

"Huh?" said Lori.

"They might just lie there for years," I said. "I know someone who didn't get them until they were thirty. On the other hand, you might have intense pain for a month before they die and rot inside your gums and take a couple of molars with them, which Daddy can knock out with a rock."

"O pioneers," I added rather sourly.

"Now come on," said John Ude.

(Funny. Everyone's around us now. I've attracted a crowd. The old raise-the-voice bit. And I wasn't even thinking of it.) I said, "I don't want to make a speech—"

"Then don't," said Cassie, who's been flapping our linens in the breeze, just to make sure we get a nice dose of the local pollens.

"Well, fuck you then!" I said. "I will."

And I did. I must have talked for five or six minutes. I told them (and more):

That a tagged planet is not colonizable but means only bearable gravity, a decent temperature range, and air that won't kill you.

That survey teams sample only one square kilometer of a planet, doubtless not this one.

That there were no mineral poisons, but that we couldn't test

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for organics or allergens.

That there could be incompatible proteins, vitamin deficiencies, chelating agents, dozens of things that could mess us up biologically in dozens of ways.

That if we could eat the local macro-life, the local micro-life could eat us.

That we could die of exposure in the winter because we had no way to make heat after our bungalow wore out and that was in six months.

That we could die of heat in a summer whose length we didn't yet know.

That a breech birth could kill. That a three-days' labor and no dilation could kill. That septicemia could kill.

That heart failure could kill.

That none of us could even recognize flint, let alone know what to do with it.

That plastic was a lousy building material.

That each of us carried five to eight lethal genes, and that even without them, humanity had not exactly been breeding for survival for the past hundred years.

That there weren't enough of us.

And more. So much more.

I stopped. Too much of the old stiff-necked pride coming back. Giant Alan Bobby, with his axe, says, "I think you better go on," and I only hope Nathalie's training has included eye-gouging and larynx-smashing because this boy is beginning to find out—in two days!—that we are far, far from any law. I hope he can be shamed. I said:

"Well, I hope we find volcanic glass, because I could recognize that; I saw it once in a museum."

This falls flat.

"What do you suggest we do?" says the Professor, with The Smile. "You seem to think we have no chance." Humor her.

I nodded.

The professor repeated, "Just what do you suggest we do?"

Silence.

"Well, anything you please," I said. "Only leave me out of it."

"That," says Nathalie, "will make three women and two men, if we exclude Victor, which puts the numbers considerably lower, doesn't it?"

"Jesus," I said; "Oh Jesus Christ, I'm forty-two years old. Do you think I can have my first child now? Besides you don't want me; my father was a bleeder."

"Liar," says Nathalie. "I saw your medical records. You're not the only one who can get past the crew doors."

"All right," I said. (Nathalie the leader. Wait til Alan finds out he can beat you up.) "All right, so you think you have the chance of a snowball in hell. Maybe you do. But *I* think that some kinds of survival are damned idiotic. Do you want your children to live in the Old Stone Age? Do you want them to forget how to read? Do you want to lose your teeth? Do you want your great-grandchildren to die at thirty? That's obscene."

Here the ground came up and hit me, as it always does when you get carried away; it was Cassie, standing over me and shouting, "Shut up! Shut up, you!" I don't think she hit me, only pushed. I wasn't

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ready, that's all. Rabble-rousing that used to work, but that doesn't work now because it's the wrong rabble and the wrong rouse. Well, we all know that.

And in everyone's face the flash of realization: no law.

John Ude said, "Come, come, dears, don't lose your temper. She'll get over it. Nathalie, what do you carry?" And the whole thing was over.

Much later Cassie, her face grey in the grey dusk, woke me accidentally. She's hunting in the first-aid kit, her face drawn.

She says, "Oh, *you*! Go back to sleep."

I said, "What's the matter?"

"Migraine," she said. "I lost my pills. But this stuff is no good." (The last with a little wail; I judged it hadn't come on yet, maybe just the flashes of light or whatever it is she gets first.) I said, "Hold on," and fished something out of my belt. Should help.

"So what's that, cyanide?" she whispered, closing her eyes as if to concentrate. It must be starting.

"No," I said. "it's like your pills. Better than that all-purpose painkiller nonsense, anyway. Go on." I held them out in my palm.

"Bet it's poison," she said, but she took it. I saw her feel her way to the water-dispenser over the uneven ground, cup a little water in her hand, and throw her head back. She came back and lay down on the mattress, out under the nothing sky. Still clear. Still no stars. One keeps getting the oddest feeling that it must be cloudy, though we've only seen morning fog. The temperature doesnt go down much at night. There's too much light, though; it's like living naked. Sometimes this place looks like a stage set or a little alleyway or back yard of somebody's familiar country home; only in the true dark does it become real.

(Like the Australian outback, as I told them in my great lecture, which looks like New Jersey and can kill you in two hours.)

She said, "What happens now, I blow up?" She cocked an eyebrow at me.

"No," I said, smiling (I couldn't help it). "The pain stops, and if it doesn't you won't care; it's got a euphoric in it, too."

"Ooh, I'm gonna get high," she said. "Jollies. . ." (Taking hold already?) "Say, hon, how come you carry all that stuff?"

I explained: it's better than money. And you never know.

"All *you'd* need is a jack-knife," she said, "if you feel like cutting your throat, which is a goddamn cowardly thing to do, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Goodnight," I said, and turned over. I wasn't facing her any more.

"Hey!" (comes the voice at my back) "You really want to kill yourself? You like getting hurt?"

"Yes, I want to do it before I get didded," I said. "And no. No follows from yes."

She chuckled sleepily. "Sorry I hit you. Forgive me, huh? What's you said about the whozis and the old guy?"

(The old guy preached a sermon in his shroud a week before his death. The whozis were the Northmen; they used to say Deliver us from fire, plague, the fury of the Northmen, *and sudden death*. Those

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crazy people who took months to die. They had things to think about.)

"Go to sleep," I said. "Dream about your migraines."

And all the other things. Such a beautiful world, really. But no music, no friends. If Earth had been hit by plague, by fire, by war, by radiation, sterility, a thousand things, you name it, I'd still stand by her; I love her; I would fight every inch of the way there because my whole life is knit to her. And she'd need mourners. To die on a dying Earth—I'd live, if only to weep.

But this stranger has never seen us before. She says: Hey, what are you funny little things? We are (O listeners, note) one quarter the height of the trees, we are hairless, give birth to our young alive, are bipedal with two manipulating limbs, have binocular vision, we regulate our internal temperatures by the slow oxidation of various compounds (food) and we live no more than a century at the very, very most (at least it feels that way, as the joke goes) and we are caught rather nastily, very badly, and sometimes even comically, between different aspirations. That is the fault of the cerebral cortex. (People are turning over, sighing, mumbling in their sleep, as the light slowly grows.)

Note: *ars moriendi* is Latin. It is a lost skill. It is ridiculed and is practiced by few.

It is very, very important.

It is the art of dying.

* * *

Day Three. Alan-Bobby found a medallion among my personal effects (he was sorting everyone's; somehow they haven't gone looking for water yet) and being a nice, obedient little boy, took it to Victor Graham, who took it to John Ude.

"What is it?" said they (in chorus, as I imagine).

He told them. He came over to me (I was making a deck of playing cards from Mrs. Graham's collection of antique post cards by first trying to peel the backs off) and swung the medallion at me, just far enough away so I couldn't grab it. Picture one early Christian, sitting cross-legged on the ground with lap covered by bedsheets, in case the cards didn't work out, and one professor—but not John Donne—who has decided to Tease.

"Now we know!" said John Ude, looking much less cosmopolitan than before.

"That? That's not mine," I said. (When in doubt, deny.)

"Come! Who cares?" he said. (Alan and Victor have gone back to whatever they were doing; I'm sure he asked them to leave "so I can get her to talk" or something.) "Be anything you like. Only it explains what happened yesterday, and if *I* explain to everyone else, they might feel a little better about you."

"You mean they'll dismiss me as a nut," I said. "All right, it's mine." He held it out to me, but I really have no particular use for the thing, and the metal chain might be useful to someone else. I said:

"Look, it's only a symbol. You know, the quartered circle, symbol of Earth and all that. Keep it. Use the chain."

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"Don't you want it?"

"No. It's only a piece of jewelry."

"Then you're not. . .?"

"I am. But I don't use the Tarot, believe in the I Ching, tell fortunes, make sacrifices, have rituals, believe in the Bible—not literally, anyway—the Tao Te Ching, or anything else. So keep it."

"An apostate!" he said.

"Oh, don't be silly." And I went on trying my fingernails on the post cards. Don't see why she can't collect holovision cubes like everyone else. Have to use sheets, anyway. I said, "Do you know how to play poker?"

But he had levered himself down on the grass next to me. No poison ivy so far. I said:

"Well, when are you guys going to find water?"

"A Trembler," he said. "My God, a Trembler in our very midst." I shut my eyes.

"The Quakers," I said, "called themselves the Society of Friends. They were called Quakers because some fool heard John Fox say he quaked in the presence of his God. Actually I like to think of myself as a tremblor. Never mind."

"But you tremble."

"Oh, all the time."

"Do you believe in God?"

"No."

"But you believe in something?"

"Everywhere. Always. See Lao Tse: Tao is in the excrement, in the broken tile. Cleave the rock and there am I. Now go away."

"But tell me," he said, professional passion rising, "what does your church—"

"No church."

"Well, what do you say about—about, say, sex?"

"Nothing."

Mrs. Graham, within earshot, having found that the tool chest was water-tight by filling it with water and having Lori take a bath in it, along with most of our clothes, caught guess-what-word. She wiped her hands free of suds and strolled over.

"May I join you?"

"I'm asking," said John Donne, "what the Tremblers have to say about sex."

"Oh, that," said Mrs. Graham, looking knowing. It was real knowledge, too; you'd think Cassie, with her silver nipples, was the expert, but I think Cassie's frigid. She only sells it. Mrs. G has been a buyer and buyers do what buyers want.

"Well, what *do* they say?" says Valeria.

"Nothing," I said. "Look, Mrs. Graham, I think you'd better keep your post cards to entertain your great-grandchildren. My fingers hurt and besides, there's no reason to sacrifice them; they're entertaining. I'll cut up a sheet."

"And about—"

"Look, John," I said, "we are not a church, only an attitude. Our principal subjects are work and mortality, not fucking. On those two I could tell you a lot but you heard it all yesterday and didn't like it. So why don't you get Nathalie to activate the broomstick and let her go look for water on it? It's a hell of a lot faster than walking."

"No, one of us will have to go," said he, "unless Mrs. Graham can drive. . .?"

"You see," he went, "Nathalie's

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life and yours and Lori's and Cassie's are too valuable to put in danger. You are childbearers. What does your religion say about that?"

"Genetic drift—" I said.

"Civilization must be preserved," says he.

"Civilization's doing fine," I said. "We just don't happen to be where it is."

"Your church—"

"My religion," said I, rising from my cross-legged position without uncrossing my legs (which rather surprised him, but it's easy for short people) "says a lot about power. Bad things! It says thou owest God a death. It says that the first thing a sane civilization does with cryogenic corpses is to pull the plug on those damned popsicles, and if you want to live forever you are dreadfully dangerous because you're not living now. It says that you must die, because otherwise how can you be saved? It says that without meaningful work you might as well be dead. It also says death hurts. And it says if you try to be strong and perfect and good and powerful, you're a damned fool and liar and the truth is not in you. So don't try my patience. It also says God is in you and you are in God as the fish is in the sea and the sea is in the fish. Saint Theresa. It *also* says—"

"You're a remarkably eclectic bunch," said John Ude, laughing. "Do you believe all this stolen theology?"

"Why not?" I said. "I stole it myself."

"Anyway, that's your field," I added. He laughed. Indulgently.

"I'll spread the word," he said. He walked off—even a twenty-five-hour day ends eventually—and happened to pass by Lori in the tool chest, who crossed her arms over herself with great rapidity and looked sheer murder at him. Odd morés: body paint's O.K. but bathing is private. Surrounded by clothes, too, all colors, bobbing about in the water. Barely room enough for the lot of them, her knees under her chin.

Mrs. Graham said, "Do you believe in life after death?"

"No," I said.

"Oh. And when was the last time you slept with anyone?" I stared at her. She did no even look much interested.

I shrugged. "Years ago. Dunno. A long time."

"And *you're* living in the present?" she said, raising her eyebrows. "Well!" Valeria Victrix. My God, yes, she must have been. In her own element.

"There's other things," I said.

"Like—?"

"Oh look, Mrs. G—"

"Don't call me Mrs. Gee," she said. It's tasteless, don't you think? Call me Valerie. And tell me what all those wonderful other things are, besides sex. And money. Because you can turn money into anything, you know."

Ah. I'm at the bottom of the pecking order now. Well, there are worse places, like the top. Inciting to riot. Destroying government property. (Symbolic?) I got arrested and was in jail overnight but I certainly wasn't at the center of it. No doubt one of those thirty-year cycles of rebellion Our Man John writes about. And as if they had no con-

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nection with physical fact. At the bottom you can hide effectively. I said:

"I was a Communist. I was in the 'twenties riots. Not very important, mind you, but it seemed to be going somewhere."

"Just after hydrogen fusion," said she. "Which took the steam out of your sails, didn't it? And made me rich. So you're a Communist. Good Heavens! And a Trembler, too? I thought they didn't go together."

"They do," I said. "Very well. And I'd prefer it if you called me what we call ourselves: Nobodies—I'm Nobody, who are you? Are you Nobody, too? How nice. Which is no bar to being a Communist. Which I was."

"You're not one any longer?" she said.

"Mrs. Gee," I said, "None of us is anything any longer."

"Frigid bitch," she said, stepping back. I said, "Oh, call me a salad, why don't you, that makes as much sense. And think of what I could call you."

"Motherrr!" (Lori) She's tired of intimacies with everybody's washing.

"Oh, Valeria," I went on, "the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, who can know it?" (She doesn't recognize, thinks I'm crazy.) I said, more prosaically, "If you bother me again, I'll poison Lori's mind against you."

She got up slowly, saying, "At least I remember that I had something," and went to pull Lori out of the washtub. A sensible woman, really, but she's going to learn she has no money here. I yelled, "Hey, don't bug Victor, he's bigger'n you!"

"Victor Graham is *my father,*" cried Lori, reaching with a glass for the cold-water dispenser, to rinse herself. "Agh!" she cried. She shouted at me, "My father would never do anything wrong!"

"Absolutely, love!" I shouted back. That child will grow up in a perfect mess of illusions.

Did grow up.

George Fox went to jail because he could not forbear rushing into Anglican services and denouncing their priesthood as mummery; he said the great bell struck upon his heart. I was not there, of course; read it in a book. The scores of thousands of books and musical compositions that are preserved in nitrogen at the British Museum in London. Prisoners and political exiles write books. Would you write a book if you were alone on a desert island? Would you scratch in the sand?

Note: we communicate by organs which produce vibrations in the air (gaseous medium). We hear, roughly, sounds from 14 to 8,000 cycles per second. "Sound" is a series of concentric rings made of the rarefaction and compression of air, water, or some other medium. We can't exist completely submerged in water (this may come as a shock to you)as the oxygen we use in our metabolisms comes out of the air. We're not equipped the other way. We draw air into ourselves and push it out. We are extremely fragile, propaganda to the contrary. "Speaking" comes from a different place than "breathing." You must understand this. Those marks, " ",

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indicate speech. Communication. You must listen. You must understand that the patriarchy is coming back, has returned (in fact) in two days. By no design. You must understand that I have no music, no books, no friends, no love. No civilization without industrialization! I'm very much afraid of death. But I must. I must. I must.

Deliver me from the body of this. This body. This damned life.

* * *

Day four. Nathalie finally went off on the broomstick because nobody knew how to operate it but she and I. I was not allowed, naturally. I relented and showed Alan-Bobby how to use the axe without cutting off his feet. He took it away from me. He was cutting wood and so was Mr. Graham, with the little hand hatchet; when they managed to collect some branches, they lit them to see if they could make a fire. Bravo! It burned. And the smoke gave Lori a violent allergic reaction; she ran away clawing at her throat, crying, viciously rotating her fingers in her ears, and making the tongue motions of someone trying (ineffectually) to scratch her soft palate. Perfect for the long winter evenings. So they put the fire out.

Mrs. Graham played gin with Mr. Graham, with the cards I'd made from bed-linen; she kept beating him.

Then she played gin with John Ude and kept beating *him*.

He said he wished to walk about, still being gracious; Mrs. G tried to get Mr. G back into playing. He said, "I don't wish to."

"But I want to, dear," said Valeria quietly. (A simple, domestic request, repeated many times; Valeria in blue and gold, the nail of her left little finger a gold sheath, inches long. Victor in blue, the evening game, Mrs. Graham saying, "Get me a drink, dear," and Victor eager and compliant. Now I know.)

Victor got up and went to talk to Alan-Bobby, who chuckled and nodded; then they got *really serious,* about drainage ditches or log cabins, or burning other wood, for Victor would not hurt his daughter, that I do know, not for the world.

Something odd about Valeria's face. See, Victrix?

She said, "Lori, I'm afraid your silly father has given you hives."

"Daddy isn't silly," (says oblivious young Graham, cleaning her toenails with a complicated spiral device that was apparently part of her personal baggage) "and I don't think you should ask him to play cards if he doesn't want to. You can be awfully mean, Mother."

I walked over to—no, I thought of walking over—

She came over to me. "Do you play gin?" I shook my head.

"You see how they treat me," and she tossed back that old-young face, that surgically lifted neck, with hair that has begun to come in gray at the roots. It's a beautiful gesture and I myself would be quite content simply to admire it, no matter the age of the one who makes it, but I don't think the men will feel the same way.

"Oh, they're bored," I said. "It's nothing. Cultural reversion. We're in the late nineteenth century is all. Do you want to bet how far

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back we'll be next week? Five to ten it'll be the eighth, A.D."

"You're crazy," said Mrs. Graham, not without affection, and went into the bungalow to make friends with Cassie.

I hid the crucial parts of my pharmacopoeia under a rock, in the tin box I will use for the vocoder, eventually. I thought of telling them I'm a vegetarian, just to make them discount even more of what I do (and they would!) but I couldn't do it with a straight face.

An endless afternoon.

John Ude: "You play Go? Chess?" I said No, dunno why, never learned.

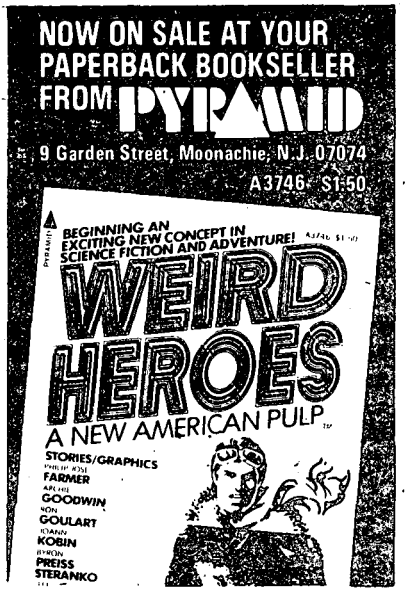
Lori remarked that she didn't see what was wrong with the Australian outback because she'd been there, in the special hotel, and it was very, very nice.

I donate my mini-sewing-kit to the communal possesions heap.

Finally, after Cassie had walked six ways around a bedsheet, deciding how to cut it up and sew it for herself, after everyone had memorized the kind of tree whose burning had made Lori sick ("This is very important" said her father), after Lori said, "Oh, I am like to die of tedium" only a dozen times, before we all went mad—

Nathalie returned on the broomstick, covered with dust. There's running water not far from here, *that* way (she gestures) which rises (she says) in a spring some two hundred kilometers to the North, in hilly country, and passes us only a couple of km. away.

"Did you have to go all that way?" says Alan-Bobby, in grave complaint. "We've been waiting."



She throws over her shoulder, "Of course I had to," and sponging off the mask near the water tank, starts drawing on one of my playing cards where the stream is, where we are, and in which direction everything is. "North" is provincial. She means Pole-wards. At this time of year you can't tell East or West from the sun; though perhaps the sunset (a little to the right) and the sunrise (a little to the left) could tell us if we are facing North or South. Arbitrary. I study it very carefully.

"Will you just stop that!" cries Nathalie furiously, for Alan is taking a bath in the tool chest, a real bath (insofar as he can fit in) and singing lustily, though nothing recognizable. He's tune-deaf. Nathalie shouts, "Goddamn it, you're wasting water!"

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"But we've got water," says he, bewildered. "You just said so."

"We've got the raw material for the distiller," she said. "That's all. We haven't even measured the flow yet. Now get out of there!"

He does, tipping the soapy water on to the ground, where it might make the grass wither or blow up (but it doesn't) and prepares to fill the tool box again.

"You. . .!" says Nathalie, white. "You imbecile!"

"I don't think," says Alan, slowly, like a man to whom a new idea has just occurred, "that you ought to talk to me like that."

"We could've put that back through the distiller!" (Which is what we've been doing with our chemical toilet.)

"I think you are much too bossy," says Alan, sponging himself off with the few inches of cold water in the tool chest. He's looking at the ground and something's happening in his head.

John Ude has backed off, smiling nervously. Victor's frowning.

Nobody likes her, not Cassie, not Mrs. Gee, not her husband, certainly. Lori and I don't count.

Dried off and in his shorts, Alan advances up to dirty, dust-streaked Nathalie, who has always been Top. He looks sly.

"Say, how come you're boss?" he says.

"Brains," she says. "How come you're such a damn fool?"

"I could take you over my knee and spank you," he says.

Nobody is interfering.

"Idiot," says she. Clearly, in government training schools, people don't do these things.

She turns her back on him, superbly.

"Look, nobody else can fly that thing," I say, very quickly. "And since you won't let me because you don't trust me, you'd better—"

"Turn around," he says.

She props the broomstick against a tree, stripping off her shirt and beating the dust out of it.

"Turn around, you bitch!" he says.

Surprised, she does. Not even afraid. Only surprised.

And Alan Bobby, who could probably uproot a tree, with those shoulders and arms and that neck, and the little face in between looking peculiarly lost—but very angry now—socks her right in the jaw, knocking her down.

He's red. He says, "Maybe now you'll treat other people with respect. Now that you know there's other people in the world."

She whispers, sprawled on the ground, white as one of my playing cards, "You bloody, blazing, impossible ass—"

He hits her powerfully on the side of the face, snapping her head about.

"That's enough," says Victor, he and John Ude, by some mysterious calculus, speaking almost at the same moment, and each coming forward to hold one arm of this baby colossus. Enough for what? Alan looks happy. I mean it: not triumphant, not overbearing, simply happy. He glows. The twenty-first century can't have been kind to this enormous fellow, and now he's discovering other interesting things to do: chopping down trees, lifting rock with his bare hands, fighting,

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knocking down women. Too bad he's so young; Victor Graham now, there's a hypertensive if I ever saw one; once his medication runs out, we might do a job like the old Jewish story: the rabbi and the Count both tied to chairs, alone in the Count's cellar for a whole night, and in the morning the rabbi serene and fresh and the Count a dead man. Apoplexy.

But Alan's useful.

Any day now he'll discover Protecting Women. I hope.

Valeria Victrix got the first-aid kit and she and I anointed and bandaged Nathalie, who was still shaking—more from anger than from shock. Cassie pushed us aside, claiming she could do it better. She was right.

I said, "Nathalie, I thought a government trainee would know—"

"I will, I will," she said.

"My God, why didn't you duck?" I said. "Or just drop under his punch? Or give him a good knee-over when you were on your back? Or stick your fingers in his eyes?"

Well, he had surprised her. Cassie thought any woman who even got into such a position was a fool to begin with. "Just tell him Lori is watching," she said. "And cry a lot. You're both cuckoo."

I said, "Look here, Nathalie, just how much training have you really had?"

Silence.

Of course. She was going *to* it, not coming *from* it.

I said quickly, "Never mind. Don't speak; your mouth is puffing up."

Sitting, holding rags soaked in cold water to her face. Streaked with dirt. John, Victor, and Alan making ecstatic plans how to move everything nearer the stream. We go to bed when the sun reaches a certain clump of trees; there's hours of daylight yet to go and nobody can tell if the day is getting shorter or longer. It remains warm, too light, but better that than that dreadful, empty, black sky.

You see the rewards of being Nobody.

* * *

The penalty: everybody comes to me for advice. Because my public word would not be trusted, I can be told anything privately. Alan whispers:

"Hey, wake up. Please?"

Dusk all around us. Scarlatti in my head. I said, "What?"

"Are you awake?" he whispered. I mumbled something and opened my eyes. Dusk or dawn, everybody's mattresses scattered all over the ground, farther apart than last night. I've got to get away from these insane people. Alan is lying by my mattress, on the damp ground, his woeful face propped in his hands. He says, in a low voice so as not to waken anyone:

"Do you think what I did was really so bad?"

"Yes," I said. "Absolutely."

"Lori chewed me out something awful," he said. "So did Mrs. Graham. And Cassie won't speak to me."

I sat up. I said, "I bet Ude gave you a lecture on civilization and Vic said you'd have him to reckon with if you tried it again."

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"How'd you know!"

"Oh, just guessing," I said.

"Well, do you think it was so bad?" Looking anxious.

"Yes. Now let me sleep. Git."

"Hell, you sound just like Nathalie! I'll tell you, maybe it wasn't right, but I bet it taught her something!"

"What did it teach her?" I said. "Never to approach you without a broken bottle in her hand? Now Lori thinks you're real sweet. And Vic Graham knows that some day you're going to pull something like that on him. It taught us all to love and trust you. Right?"

He sat back on his heels. He said sulkily, "I could do it to you, too, you know."

I said, "Really, Victor? Sorry—slip of the tongue," and was on my feet, holding straight out in that treacherous light the screwdriver I had abstracted from the tool chest on day one.

You surely don't think I'm fool enough to walk about without a weapon, do you?

He reached for it and I gave his hand a good slash. He withdrew it, extremely astonished.

"Oh, go away," I said. "I haven't the slightest intention of hurting you and you don't have the slightest intention of really hurting me. You're just showing off. You're a good, big, strong, decent, beautiful man, and you can pride yourself on that all you like. But don't forget; even though she's exasperating, *Nathalie is smart* and if you start throwing your weight around, nobody else will like you and she'll take advantage of that. Remember: you're not stronger than all of us put together. Besides, Lori's stuck on you."

He lit up. "Yeah!"

"So go to sleep now, huh?"

He said, "How old do you think Lori would have to be before she can have babies?"

"Sixteen," I said (guessing). "Now go to sleep."

Day five: we'll move everything nearer the river, like lemmings. Nathalie will start turning bruise-blue in the face. Alan will creep about like a wounded pup, ostracized by all, scorned by Lori Graham; the worst burdens loaden on his back, meke as the knyght that suffereth for his ladye's sake.

Which won't last.

* * *

Day five: we worked eighteen hours, slept, worked again. Alan has reverted to the intensely polite, self-suppressing youth everybody knew and loathed. My feet hurt. I tried to explain about orthopedic malfunctions and was told I was malingering. Then my ankles swelled out most satisfactorily in the evening, looking distressingly like small cantaloupes, and everyone was most apologetic. I said No, no, I had to carry my share. Then my ankles got even more so. Cassie washed them, the great nurse, sex-pot, earth-mother. We went to bed. She says: "Sssst!"

Me: What?

She: You ever had an orgasm?

Me: Can't remember.

She: Liar. I mean during fucking. I never did. Women are all liars about it, like Vicki Graham. She just pretends, to show off, you know.

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(Silence.)

She: Ever want babies?

Me: I dunno. Sort of. Not really.

She: I do.

(Silence.)

She: They don't let you, if you're poor. But here—

Me: I see. Well, good luck. How are you going to handle the men?

She just laughed. Then she said with perfect certainty, "Those babies'll love *me*, not their daddies." she nudged me. "Hey, madhead, Ude and Graham are going to take your pills away from you in the morning."

"And who told them, you bloody traitor!" said I.

"Sssssh!" She looked around uneasily, then whispered, "I did."

She added, "But I told you first, didn't I?"

* * *

Day six: I am set upon from behind, bound, and searched, protesting indignantly. They slit the lining of my jacket (Cassie: "Oh, don't take on so; I'll sew it up again!"), violate my leather belt, ("Hey, look, it's got pop-outs," says Alan), and pinch my body-suit up and down (without me in it, of course). They collect all the psychedelics. I cry, very very hard. They free my hands so I can blow my nose and I whack Cassie, who looks startled. Then they let me put on my body-suit and Victor Graham stands very impressively in front of me, hands out: "More."

"Me?" I said. "Me have anything more? I swear—"

Finally I unscrew my left shoe-heel and give them Cassie's headache medicine. Then I unscrew my right shoe-heel and hand over a glass vial. Victor starts to crush the thing and this part of the scene is genuine, believe me, I yelled "Don't! Stop!"

Consternation.

I said, "That's lethal. It's a nerve poison, works right through the skin. You don't have to drink it. Victor! Just put it down. No, it's not bio-degradable, so you can't put it in the chemical toilet. Just leave it in the sun for a while. That'll ruin it. *But don't let anybody touch it.*"

Victor confers with John Ude, both of them gingerly handling the vial. Ude nods. I've told the truth. (And I have. What I did not tell them was how many more I've got hidden back at the old site.) I started to cry harder, which isn't difficult because I'm thinking of how damned unfair it is that I shall never hear again my melancholy Dowland; semper Dowland, semper dolens. Ever Dowland, ever doleful. No tee-hee-hee-quoth-she for him. I notice through my tears that Nathalie appears to have formed some kind of alliance with John Ude, her normal impressiveness having proved unequal to Alan's muscles. The two intellectuals. The two bureaucrats. Tee-hee-hee in the mattresses. They don't want to set me free, but that *is* foolish, as I tell them at great length, and I cry a lot harder, and even rock back and forth, which is nine parts fury, until Cassie says, "Oh stop it, hon, I'll fix your jacket. What were you going to do with those things, anyway? Kill yourself by an overdose?"

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"No," said I. "I just feel humiliated." She put her arm around me, which is enough to make you feel an awful bemmon. She then promised to fix my jacket.

I gave them back the screwdriver.

Oh, it went like a charm!

John Ude, still uncontrollably curious, says to me on the last trek back to the old place: "Really, I cannot understand why you want to die."

"Neither can I," I said.

"Well, then?"

I said, "John Donne, John - John with - your - britches - on, John - Whittington - turn - again - lord - mayor - of - London - Town, we *are* dead. We died the minute we crashed. Plague, toxic food, deficiency diseases, broken bones, infection, gangrene, cold heat, and just plain starvation. I'm just a Trembler. My God, you're the ones who want to suffer: conquer and control, conquer and control, when you haven't even got stone spears. You're dead."

"For dead people, we're acting pretty brisk," says Ude, with The Smile. Haven't seen that for a while; Nathalie must've bucked him up quite a bit.

"It's one of the symptoms," I said. "Galvanism. Corpse jerking. Planning, Power. Inheritance. You know, survival. My genes shall conquer the world. That's death."

"Hear you were quite big in that power and planning stuff about fifteen years back," he says.

"Then you heard wrong. I walked out one day and gave it all up. Hideously ineffectual."

"Still—"

"For everything there is a time and a season under Heaven; now you ought to know that."

He keeps on smiling The Smile. No recognition.

I said, "You're not an historian of ideas."

"Clever," says he. "I wondered when you'd tumble to it. I was what you'd call a bureaucrat. That's why Nathalie and I get along. She says we think alike."

"Sure, after yesterday," said I. Ude halted.

"Don't push us," he said. "Don't you push us too much now."

"Then leave me alone," I said. "Just leave me alone and I'll have no reason to push anybody, huh?"

But they won't be able to leave me alone. I know. Not because of the child-bearing, because of the disagreement. The disagreement is what matters.

How far will I push them? To where? All the way?

* * *

Day seven: as lunatics or lemmings will, we dragged our glass-and-plastic bungalow, the only dwelling with a heater this side of God-knows-what, two kilometers to the stream, the travois being its own light-but-stubborn bottom. It took all day. Too tired to do anything else. Lying on the mattress outdoors, Nathalie sketching in the dirt the plans of sanitary latrines (downstream). Quickly goes in and washes and disinfects her hands. No one has yet deliberately ingested one morsel of anything in this place; still we must have been breathing in and swallowing a good deal

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and no one's dead yet. We live on the freeze-dried. How to test it out? A fruitless (sorry) question.

They asked me to sing. My memory was stuck on Dowland; I thought of "Flow, My Tears," "In Darkness Let Me Dwell," "A Heart That's Broken"—well! This is not good public relations. "Come All Ye Sons of Art"? Nothing with polyphony. Finally I sang "Sweet Kate" with all the tee-hee-hee. Taught Cassie, who has a good natural voice, to come in on it, and added a few nasty Renaissance songs about jealousy (dreadful people), "Farewell, Unkind," and finished with a sudden burst of remembrance, swooping in great fake arcs, those posh-velveteen melodies:

Blue desert
And you and I. . .

(Where on earth did I learn "The Desert Song"?)

Lori sang Gilbert and Sullivan and forgot the middles.

"Oh, you *can* sing!" cried Alan, in a burst of admiration (at me, not at Lori; the mystic maiden can, of course, do anything).

Schubert! Of course. I said, "More tomorrow." But can I do the eleven-note jumps upward on an o-umlaut? Never. Ah! Sea songs and folk songs.

(Did I learn them in high school?)

Good night, court jester.

* * *

Day eight: the great womb robbery. The day started out well enough, with me limping so badly (at least I tried to) that I was excused work by John Ude, told "Oh, that's too bad," by several others, and ended up playing cards with Lori (I mean the bed-sheet cards). For some reason nobody mentions she's never expected to do any work, God knows why. She kept beating me at Casino, while I rubbed my ankles.

"Are those orthopedic shoes?"

I said uh huh.

She yelled excitedly, "I've got the ten of diamonds!" and took in an eight of clubs and a two of hearts. (That's three points.) She looked at me sideways, then stuck her nose in the air.

"So you want us to kill ourselves!" she said, with contempt.

I just made a face and threw up my hands.

"You think nobody'll find us?" she added, a little sharper.

"Oh, I was just talking," I said. She was counting up her winnings so far. She said, frowning, "You're a coward!" and put her cards down in a neat little pile, with a stone on top of it.

I said uh huh again.

"The one thing my Mummy and Daddy taught me when they got me from the crèche when I was seven," she said, still sharply, "was never to give up on anything. And never to be a coward." Five years of money, that's five years of enforced childishness. She started shuffling the cards in a very slow method invented by herself; put them in piles of three each, with a pebble on top, then take one off the top of each pile, then subtract every fourth card and put *them* on the bottom. I can't figure it. Daddy had set up a kind of awning with four stakes chopped from a tree and one

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of the sheets; we were sitting under this and watching the others sweat at the foundation of the communal house, about fifty meters away from the water and several meters above it on a slight elevation. Nathalie had suggested some kind of wooden rockers under the house, like the type used in Colonial New England; good for winds, for shifting ground, and floods. I don't know what they think they're going to insulate it with—wood shavings, chopped by hand?

Lori started to deal the cards. You have to pick each of them up with both hands and hold it taut; otherwise it drapes and you can see the other side. Managing a handful of them isn't easy. I said:

"Shall I tell your fortune?"

"Huh?" said she.

"Do you know how to read palms?"

She shook her head. "That's silly." She stuck out her hand, then giggled and drew it back.

"All right," she said, after a moment. "Go ahead. But I know what you'll say!"

"Hmm," I said, "do you now, little miss." That struck her as excruciating: Me, the gypsy. She put on an expression very like her mother's only far more exaggerated: eyes rolled up, corners of the mouth pulled down.

I said, "You have an immensely long life-line." (I cannot tell a life-line from a thumb.) "Here," I said at random. "You will die some time in your eighty-ninth year. You will be well-known. Even famous. Extraordinary!"

"Known to how many?" said Lori quickly.

"Millions," I said (acting out vast surprise). "Your life-line is interrupted here by. . .by relative isolation for a period of years. . .not many years, perhaps eight or nine. And then there's a great blossoming of renown, almost as great as what I see at the end of your life."

"Well, obviously we're going to be saved," she said pedantically.

"So it would seem. Here" (I think I was somewhere in the middle of her palm) "is the line which indicates either children or good work, fruitful work. It branches four—five—no, many more times. But I don't know if that means children or work."

"Work," she said promptly. "I'm a musician."

"Oh," I said.

"Yes," (and she nodded) "I'm a composer."

"Are you? Think of that!"

"Well, I will be," she said. Then she added, "That's the same thing. But I'll tell you a secret—" (she all but whispered this, leaning over the piles of cards) "*I don't like. commercial music.*"

"Oh," I said. What hearts did *I* wring when I was a child? Just a biological device, Nature keeping us old ones in the service of the young.

She said, frowning, "You look funny."

Then she added, without the slightest transition, "I like serial music, like the late twentieth-century stuff where it goes deedle deedle deedle deedle deedle deedle deedle deedle for half an hour and then it goes doodle, just once, and you could die with excitement."

"Uh huh," I said.

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"I've written one—well, half of one—composition." She stuck out her hand. "Go on."

I said, "You know, Lori, what I think your fortune means is that you will not only be famous for music, but also for having been rescued here. They'll probably call the place after you. They do things like that, you know."

"Of course," she said. "And everybody gets rescued. As my father was trying to tell you."

"John Ude was trying to tell me, I believe," I said.

"*My father*!" She stuck out her hand. "Go on."

"It's a musician's hand," I said shamelessly, "that's true. And the rest. . .well, I can't see much out of the ordinary except riches, of course. . .you know that. . .I think you will write a book about your experiences—*here*"—(pointing) "but of course I can't tell whether that's a book or music. The wealth line increases at that point. And marriage—"

"I'll *never* get married."

"Yes, there's hardly anything. Though your love-line is quite another thing. But who, of course, or even what, I can't tell."

"Artistic passion?" said she.

"Mm hm. And the rest. . .well, it doesn't tell us anything we don't know. Sensitive. Intellectual. But animal vitality, mustn't forget that. That's about it."

"Oh," she said. She was disappointed.

"It changes," I said, "almost day to day. Most people don't know that. Small changes, of course, nothing big. But that's all I can see today."

"You'll do it again in a week," said Lori decisively, beginning to deal her cards. It did not seem to occur to her that she was giving me orders. I pictured her giving orders to Alan-Bobby.

No.

She dealt the cards, a very finicky young woman, concentrating deeply.

Suddenly she said, "Are you really a coward?"

"No," I said.

"Yes you are," she said. "Pick up your cards. If you teach me to read palms, I'll read *your* palm. That'll tell us."

She won the next game, too.

We were well into our third and Lori was singing something from Gilbert and Sullivan about not telling him, her, or it, because etiquette didn't permit, and not even hinting, whispering, or pointing it out—yes, very apposite—and I was bored—when Alan shouted "Over here, everyone!" because he had the big voice. They had been slacking work for some time, with a lot of talk between Nathalie, the ex-professor, and Victor. (One to dig, two to chop, and two to carry either logs or dirt in the tool chest: Nathalie, Alan, Valeria—with the hand hatchet—Victor, Ude.) Symptoms of a conference.

"Bring your tent!" shouted Alan conscientiously.

So we did—rather, I did; Lori wouldn't touch it for fear that she might break out in hives. I told her while I was uprooting it (and not entirely out of compassion; she could be a real whiner when she chose) that she'd live to be eighty, name all the plants in the region,

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lose her allergies as she grew up, and end up writing the first book about Lori's Planet.

The court. Under another jury-rigged tent. After this my memories get a little muddled. Disturbance; ripples in a pond. I smiled mechanically. Won't be thought a good, reliable witness—

(By whom?)

Reliable witness.

Victor's very big. *Very* polite. So you can't get at him, perhaps. Valeria was off to one side, with Cassie. Victrix patted the ground next to her invitingly and Lori stared carefully in another direction. Alan, awed, with his mouth open; John Ude peculiarly cool; and Nathalie grimly watching the ground.

Mister-not-Professor Ude said, "I call this meeting to order."

Oh. Oh my. Important.

"You're chairman?" I said. "Well! Who made you chairman?"

Nathalie: "I did."

That is, they both did. Things are going to be very interesting.

Victor: "That's a valid objection. I suggest we begin by selecting a chair."

Silence. Then Nathalie said wearily, "I nominate"—Guess Who—well, he was nominated, seconded, and voted in. Almost unanimously.

John Ude: "Do you have any more objections?"

Me: "No."

(Almost unanimously means me and Lori, Lori because she wanted her father to be, and I abstained.)

"We have to talk about something very important," said Ude. "I mean having children."

Hand up, me. He recognized me—does this sound as crazy to you as it does to me?—and I said, "Priorities backwards. First we have to poison Lori."

"Huh?" she said; "you're crazy."

"Mr. Chairman," I said, "point of order. Is it necessary for us to pretend that we've never met before?"

He smiled. Oh, the universes tremble when John Ude smiles! He said, "I suppose we can afford to be somewhat more informal. In fact, I think it will be a very good thing. Please go ahead."

I said, "I'm only trying to suggest that before we start any babies, we'd better start finding out what we can eat around here."

(Lori, sotto voce, with a dig in the ribs, "Why'd you say poison?")

Cassie said, "Sure, why her?"

"I was joking," I said. "I meant she's allergic to so many things. She should be the last person to eat anything."

Nathalie: "Will you volunteer to be the first?"

"No," I said. "Will you?"

Nathalie got up, very angry. "We have food and water for five months and three weeks! Perhaps you'd like the rest of us to eat grass and leave it all to you?"

"I waive it," I said. "I leave it alone. Give me the broomstick and I'll go up to the head of the stream and drink the water without the purifier. If I start hurting, I'll kill myself."

"This is no time for joking." (John Ude)

I said, "I'm not joking. It's a genuine offer."

Silence.

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"About the children," said Ude. "Mister Graham, as the oldest of us, has offered to donate his genetic material first."

Cassie giggled.

Nathalie glared at her. But Nathalie also sat down.

(Was Victor on a special diet, on the ship?)

I got up and ambled towards the stream. By all that's alive, a melodramatic "Stop!" and then "Stop her!" from John Ude, and here was Alan-Bobby running ahead of me, like some crazy postman with a Special Delivery (excuse me) and turning sheepishly to stand in front, his arms stretched out.

"All right," I said, "all right, I can go taste the river when you're asleep, can't I?" and I headed back towards the improvised council tent, feeling in my palm the pellet-gun. Reflex. Not here, not now. Back in the sleeve of the jacket you go.

How'd it get there?

Oh, I forgot to tell you. . .

Between yesterday and today, when everyone was asleep, I went back to the old site and dug everything up. Including my pharmacopoeia. Left them lying on the ground with dreams of The Desert Song ringing in their ears. (I had mist-spray hypnotics in my underwear. I'm not *that* quiet.) I tiptoed off, anyway, feeling Alan-Bobby as he sat up, probably talking in his sleep, with a swift squish to the nostrils and very daring, went off on the trudge to the old camp, where it took me forever to pry up that rock. I left in the dusk; I returned at the end of the dark; the sky ragged where the sun rises and sets, one patch of cloud red, red as blood, red as fury. I gave them each a last spray as I came, too. Except Lori. (She might be allergic.) She was wiggling and muttering uncomfortably to herself. Watched her face slowly settle itself and become clarified as the light grew and grew. Without getting anywhere—I mean the light—for hours and hours more.

"Hey, you better go back," says Alan.

"Oh." I sigh. "Okay." And go back, helpless.

Now I'm going to be first. I said, "Well, you'll have to wait until I'm off the pills. And then it sometimes takes a few months to restore fertility. And we *don't* want septuplets, so that's another couple of months."

"You're not taking any pills," said Nathalie.

"Because you've never seen me do it? Whew!" said I. (That last's a whistle.)

"What are you taking?" said Ude.

I made up a name.

"Then you don't," (he said, blinking slightly but looking steadily at me the while) "have to worry about multiple births. There haven't been any on that since '07. I don't see why you and Victor can't start now, if you like."

Victor said politely that he certainly wouldn't mind as long as I wouldn't mind.

I said I would mind.

"Why?" said Nathalie.

"Personal preference," said I.

"It's her religion!" said Cassie, a little indignantly. "You should respect a person's religion, you know."

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"She's probably *left-handed*." This is Mrs. Graham spitefully. Cassie obviously wasn't sure what "left-handed" meant; she leaned towards Mrs. Graham, who whispered to her.

Cassie colored to the roots of her hair—and her neckline (a sheet).

"In a month, if you don't mind," I said to Victor, with a sort of little bow. "When it'll do most good." Now he can't have liked that. But he looked unmoved and nodded his head. Polite. Calm. Great handsome, hollow monument of a man. Perhaps he's run out of something. Perhaps he's going to be ill. Hypertensive or cardiac, I can almost smell it. Or some other fatality hanging in the air and nobody wants to talk about it in front of the daughter. Get him before he dies.

"Before that month, then," said John Ude, grinning in my direction, "Nathalie has suggested herself, and afterwards the other lady, Cassie. The—uh—persons involved can certainly find privacy almost anywhere, I suppose. Anyway, it's none of our business."

Cassie, who was folding the hem of her improvised dress under and over with her fingers, again and again, said:

"I'm going to be called by my full name. I don't like Cassie. That's only a professional name."

"Of course," said John Ude.

"Tell us," said Victor.

Alan looked blankly receptive.

"My name is Cassandra," said Cassie.

Nobody caught it. Lori said, "That's a nice name," (possibly to annoy her mother). I inhaled when I should've swallowed and for thirty seconds there until I stopped coughing John Ude was very tender and careful with his walking womb.

"Cassandra's always wanted children," he said pleasantly to me when I could breathe again. Nathalie was behind him, looking over his shoulder.

I tried to call him a son-of-a-prick and only croaked.

"Yes?" he said, very alert—but he always seems alert; it's part of the window-dressing.

"Listen," I whispered, just managing to speak. "I'll go away. Take the broomstick and send it back, very slow; so you can catch it. Go upstream—downstream—doesn't matter—try the water. Take no food. Just leave me."

"No!" said Nathalie.

"Why?" I coughed some more.

"If I've got to do it, you've got to do it," said Nathalie.

"You. . .don't have to." And I cleared my throat. At last.

"We'd better keep an eye on her," said Nathalie to John Ude.

I think I put my head in my hands. Suppose they found my gun? My things? Wait long enough and it won't matter. Although I can always do it. Anyone can do it. Easy enough to kill if it doesn't matter about being found out. Then perhaps they'd kill me, and it would be over, and that's all right.

But I'm afraid of waiting too long. Eroding. Purpose all gone. Slipping into no-decision, no-purpose; hard enough as it is. God knows. I think everyone loves it here because their choices are all made for them; we were never very comfortable with our fate in our own hands, were we? Better to act

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on the modern religion: an incarnation of the immortal germ-plasm. Nostalgia for the mud. Simplicities.

I said, "Cassandra!" and burst out laughing, coughing again.

"You're going mad," said Nathalie, with a certain satisfaction and she and John Ude stepped backwards so they could talk, I suppose, about *keeping an eye on* me.

And nobody knows. Nobody knows anything about anything.

"Aren't you going to play cards with me?" said Lori, suddenly turning up with the cards in a sort of bag she'd made out of a scarf of her mother's. It was bright, bright blue. Royal blue.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?" And did.

* * *

Day nine. I took my turn digging and carrying. I was watched, always by someone. Nathalie and Victor disappeared dutifully over the hill while the rest of us snored (presumably).

* * *

Day ten. Watched. They overestimate their perseverance. At bedtime—the sun still circling round the same eternal altitude—Nathalie talked angrily about tying me to something for the night so's I wouldn't disappear. I told her not to be a fool; anything she could tie, I could untie.

People were embarrassed.

* * *

Day eleven. Idiot labor. A Long House none of us will ever live to enjoy. The food goes faster this way. A midday siesta under the tent, all of us huddled together in the shadow. But it merely gets hotter and hotter until sunset.

The sun is not changing its position, not fast enough to be timed, anyway. The weather stays the same. No rain, but the stream keeps up. By some eerie common consent Valeria has become the cook—good for nothing else, I suppose. That is, she prepares the packets of freeze-dried, and pours stream-water into the purifier. No one dead yet.

The idyllic desert island. Odd how that started out "deserted" and ended up "desert". Hence the conventional sand and palm trees. No, "desert" once meant only wild.

That it is.

* * *

Day twelve. Victor's ill. He sat all day under the tent, dozing and taking some sort of pills. Angina, I'll be bound.

More hauling, more digging on that idiot building.

Early evening (when the sun stands at four o'clock above a particular hill; we are in a little valley with a close horizon): Flop. Flop. Flop. Flop. Valeria and Victor have already flopped. Discarded pill-bottle on the ground. Lori's being kept away, mostly by Alan, sometimes by Nathalie, who says that she ought to work for a change.

(Lori stuck out her tongue. I giggled.)

Victor looked unconcerned at this invasion of his privacy: or not concerned, rather.

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Lori said carelessly, "Oh, Dad's had this before." Valeria is paying no attention to him or to any of us; she's asleep. I have begun to be startled at anyone's coming up behind me, with a kind of shrinking at the presence of the rest of them, but Victor Graham is magnificently vacant; doesn't care that there are people around him.

We slept—we've gotten into the habit, it seems, of sleeping in stages: part in the middle of the "afternoon," then a siege before the dark, then a kind of premature wakefulness for a few hours until the twilight begins and depresses everybody. I seem to go to sleep faster than anyone, but I always wake a little earlier. Nervousness. I had my head by his knee.

Shocked awake.

Yawning. It wasn't anything, I thought.

Listening wakefully. Eyes open.

It's a little gasp from Victor Graham. He got up, holding (I think) his left arm with his right, for I saw him pass over me, and from that position on the ground, with my face down, it was like feeling a cloud go over you at an enormous height; I said he walked between us and over us, between two hills, Equator-wards.

He stopped to retch.

All I have to do is lie here and pretend to sleep.

He's walking off between the hills. Going to die alone, I suppose.

I got up carefully and picked my way to John Ude, put one hand over his mouth, and with the other, pinched him.

"Ssssh!" I jerked my head at Victor. You must say for the not-Professor that he takes things in quickly. We knew that neither of us must wake Lori and that she's the lightest sleeper of all because she hasn't worked.

"Where'd you put my stuff?" I whispered, off at the edge of the group.

His wits are wandering. He had to go back and wake Nathalie. And all the time, you know, it was burning a hole in my pocket, I mean my belt pop-out, the stuff he should be using; I was extraordinarily conscious of it sitting over my left hip-bone.

He came back with Nathalie and we ran. Victor had sat down under one of the stumpy trees and was staring ahead of him. Nathalie, fingers shaking, spread out on the dirt the stuff they had confiscated from me and looked helplessly at Ude, who was beginning to frame a question, but I had it out and the string around his arm, the stuff into the vein. These are collapsible, permanent syringes, foldups like accordion pleating.

Nathalie said, "Antisepsis—"

I said, "Lie down, you fool," to Victor, and he did. A little less livid, as the stuff got to him.

I said, "It's a stimulant. Can you swallow?"

"No," he said, still concentrating on the pain.

"You can," I said, selecting from the pile, "bite on this and breathe. It's a mind-bender; won't stop the pain, but it'll separate you from it. Takes the nastiness out of it."

He did. Nathalie bent over, but I shooed her away. "Do you want Lori?" I said.

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"No."

"Your wife?"

"Won't come." He whispered, very carefully. The cyanotic grey was ebbing. I said:

"The stimulant is only temporary. I can give you more until we either run out of it or it wears you out, but I can't heal you. You may heal yourself if you lie very still."

He said, "Tell Lori—"

"What?" said Nathalie anxiously.

"Anything. Make it up."

I said, "Mister Graham has other things to do right now. We will tell Lori and Valeria that he thought of them, that his last words were of them, and that he loved them."

The dying man laughed. "Not—wife."

"But I can tell Lori, can't I?" I said.

He nodded, just a bit.

"Victor loves his daughter and gives the planet to her. He's proud of her and knows she'll do well. Okay?"

"Yes!" His color was stealing back, almost magical, but it puts a worse burden on the great arteries crowning the heart. I said, "I think you'd better go back and deal with the scene there. Both of you. When they wake up, you know; you can tell them whatever you like."

"I?" said Nathalie. "I'm supposed to be with him!" Victor's gaze was still so fixed that to get his attention you had to be right in front of him; Nathalie put herself in front of me, directly in his line of vision; she had the anxiety lines of the brows furrowed together, in that very expressive field of musculature above and around the human eyes. The eyes themselves, you know, show almost nothing.

John Ude said, "Perhaps I should stay—"

I said, "Are you afraid of Lori?" and then to Victor, "Who do you want to stay with you? Which of us?"

"You," he said.

"Of course. She knows the drugs," said John Ude with The Smile.

"You're not afraid," he said, "of me."

Silence.

"Leave that and that and that," I said, pointing. "Now get cracking! You've work to do."

"None of these is marked," said Ude, finally, gathering up half my things. (He thought he had it all.)

"I know," I said. "I also sell knowledge." John Ude patted me on the shoulder: loathesome, loathesome!—said into my ear, "Good of you."

Victor said, with a smile, "Are you sorry? You know. . . ."

"I think I am," I said. And almost was. Sorry for him, I mean. One thing dying people usually know, if they have any sense left, is what they want; and that is so rare in the human condition that it commands a certain kind of respect. Although I suppose they may know what they want only because there's so little left to choose from that the task's easy. It strips people down. And what I feel—or felt—about him, I don't know. An intense curiosity. Where he was going, where he came from, who he was. It's a world going out—though there are some worlds I know too well to care about, like Ude.

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"I was poor," he said. "Didja know that?" I shook my head. Something of the old timbre back in his voice, still half a whisper. I could never find pulses in the wrist, so I put my fingertips on the great vein in his neck. He smiled. "Feels nice," he said. Then: "I worked on myself. Made myself good-looking, you know: clothes, accent, the works. Spent a lot on surgery; no whore could've done better."

He grasped my hand, then let his arm fall but still kept holding on to my hand, I think out of fear, though he wasn't feeling any pain; couldn't have talked that easily if he had.

He said, "I can satisfy anyone."

"Did you practice?"

He nodded. "Of course." What a way to spend a life. Here is the kernel of Victor Graham: I can satisfy anyone. Myself, I eat potatoes. Well? He must've read something in my face because he imprisoned my fingers more severely; thank God I don't wear rings. He said, "Do you despise me?"

"In comparison with *my* friends?" I said and couldn't help it; I began to laugh. This pleased him.

Then I said, "I only wish it had been more fun for you."

"It was all right." The cyanotic tinge was coming back but he didn't seem to feel it. "Wasn't so easy the first few years, but when I met Val I knew I had it made. Worked like hell to get her, too."

"You took her name?"

"No. She's old fashioned. I used to—was able to—order her around sometimes, then. . .think we flipped a coin. . .you know, I loved her but I can't remember now."

"And Lori?" I said.

"A beautiful child. Still a child. You'll look after her?"

"Of course."

"This is all for her," he said, with a stirring of the arm as if he would sweep it round him to indicate the horizon.

"She'll grow up better here," I said.

"Sure," he said without irony, "and her mother'll do some work. It'll do her good. Val'll live long." He sighed. He said, "You should take some of this. It's religious. I feel like a Christian."

"Instant religion? There's something like that in the trade name: Forgiveness without tears. Something. But I don't feel like forgiving anyone, you see. I'm nasty."

What I didn't say: how dull it can become after a while, these exaltations that leave nothing behind them. The headiness of anger. Perhaps I'm an addict. An anger addict. I said, "Victor, the analgesic will last for hours, but the stimulant's wearing off. I can give you more"—holding it up—"or you can fight it out alone, or there's this"—putting the glass ampoule by his free hand where his hand lay on the ground, that eternal mid-afternoon sun palely lighting it, the time just before the light becomes ruddy. In a few hours we would have our twilight.

"What's that?" he said. "The ultimate analgesic?"

I think that surprised me more than his use of "Christian." I said, "You clever man!"

He said, "If you hold my hand."

"Can't," I said. "It's a contact poison, worked through the skin. You break the ampoule. If I held

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your hand I would run a considerable risk of being ultimately anesthetized myself."

"Death's your friend," he said.

I shook my head. "Never!"

"Don't want it," he said, trying to flick away the ampoule with his finger, so I rescued it—very carefully—and laid it to one side. Must remember where it is, too. Better still, pick it up and put it away in my belt. Which I did.

He said, "I haven't been much good to Val these last months." He was still looking straight ahead of him. He said, "I want to see the sun," so I turned him about with great care, Pole-wards—the sun was declining into what we had agreed to call the North, interrupted by a stumpy tree on the side of a hill. I moved him until he could see it, propping his head in my lap—he was a heavy man—I think leaving the poison with him would have been useless unless I'd put it in his hand; he was too feeble, for all his talking.

He said, "I'm going to die."

He was not that cyanotic. Perhaps the light concealed it, turning him rosy. This damned place has been looking stranger and stranger each morning, despite my trying not to see it that way—imagination? Like meeting a childhood friend: at first the resemblance is as clear as can be, and then after a quarter of an hour, you begin to wonder. I suppose you see all the other things time has laid down on the face.

He said, "Go away."

I didn't move. He was breathing with difficulty. I could hear his breath stop, catch, go on, then stop again, like an electric motor with a

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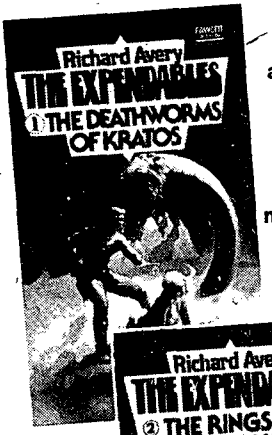

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bad connection—too apt a comparison—catch a few times, go on, stop—

I think I was hypnotized by the tree's shadow as it crawled towards us, or the shifting motes of sun in it between the leaves, the sun having sunk behind the tree and each spot of light a camera obscura of the sun: round as a coin and twinkling.

He was trying very hard to breathe. No oxygen going to that brain. Then he stopped. Easy as pie. I knew Victor was still there, shut up inside himself, but the housing was shot. No good any more. He couldn't feel anything anyone could do to it. An eerie feeling, that heavy, motionless head in my lap; you never know how mobile people are (in sleep, in hypnosis, in the deepest, drugged state) until you feel them dead. "Dead weight" is the real thing. I know.

Two minutes.

Five. . .

Gone. The last traces died out. Only the coral shell now; the thing making it had gone somewhere else. Or anyway, wasn't here. I let his head down on to the ground—he was staring straight up—and stretched, spinning about dizzily as if for all the world I could catch him as he flew off. Catch a sight of him. There's some complicated, biochemical reason for the loss of weight at death—though it feels the opposite—but if Victor in the shape of a butterfly was zipping off to better realms, I never saw him.

The sun still hung there, behind the tree. It won't set for an hour. I've been talking into my vocoder (back in the left-hand sleeve if anyone comes) all about this. Will put it back now. Go tell everyone else, ugh.

Peaceful for the first time here. My God, how peaceful. How quiet it is. Sinful to violate that quiet.

Inconvenient to me, anyway.

Sssst! Victor!

Bon voyage.

(There's some old play where that is sung to a sinking ship, more and more merrily as the ship goes down. "We hope you know how to swim," they say. Perhaps we all know how to swim, by instinct, the way newborns do. They do.)

God help us, a life after *this* one?

One's enough.

* * *

They found me, they said, asleep by the (dead) body. Nathalie was very angry. They shook me awake and I stumbled and yawned back to the others; Lori was crying next to her mother while Valeria said, (pushing her daughter's head into her own lap, as if blinding her) "We want to remember him as he was." Amazing.

The sun gone, the twilight darkened. The Smudge comes out.

As we've named it.

* * *

Day thirteen. Time to try again. Victor was put in the earth but I wasn't allowed to help—I think I've become tapu. Either that or envy. (What an extraordinary idea, planting people in the ground as if you expected them to sprout! I think they should be left about to rot, day after day, so we'd get used to it and stop being afraid of it.) When the

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burial party came back and the shovel was passed to Nat for digging the latrine (some more) I went and sat at her feet. I was careful about my eyes because she might throw dirt at me with the shovel—on purpose or otherwise.

I didn't say anything.

"Well?" said Nathalie, dirt-streaked, the sweat darkening in patches on her black body-suit.

"Let me dig?" I said. She leaned on the shovel, looking down at me, then turned back to her work, making the dirt fly. She was extending the pit into a shallow channel which would later be lined with something; I'm not sure what they expected to do, maybe collect fertilizer. Standing, she was above me; if she'd been down in the pit, our heads would have been on the same level.

I said, "Just wanted to talk to you."

Then I said, "I envy you."

She stopped and looked at me, nonplussed.

"I mean," I said, "that it must be a great simplicity. Right? A good feeling. Not being a wretched, mixed-up mess like me. I mean to face the old problems instead of the new ones, to know what the solutions are. Even though it's so hard."

I said, "All right, I know I'm a trial to all of you."

Now I did not like the expression on Nathalie's face. I like to know what's coming, too. She threw down her shovel (which, hitting a projecting rock in the side of the pit, instantly unhinged itself into two separate pieces) and stood there looking at me. I wondered if

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Nathalie were not perhaps the Spirit of Death around here: I mean hard work, looking to the future, planning about things, that sort of stuff. She said:

"You fool."

Then she said, "*Do you think I WANT to be here!*"

"Don't—I—" I said, leaning backward. If your legs are crossed, you can't get up unless you lean forward, so I was effectively tied in a knot; if I'd got up, it would've been right into Nathalie's face.

She said, "Oh God, you make me sick!"

I could roll sideways and get up.

"You," she said, but her voice had changed and her pupils were no longer all her eyes, so I knew she was only going to talk and I could afford to stay there, to stay helpless; she said, "Oh, what do you know about it!"

I said, "I'm sorry." I looked meek. (And I was sorry, only none of them will take the cure, not one.)

She sank to her knees, but still leaning over me, which is something they teach them in government school, maybe; she said, "Do you know where I was going before I came here?"

I shook my head.

She sat down, sort of collapsed sideways. She said, "Well, I wasn't going to dig latrines. Or bear babies. Or plant crops."

(There are no crops.)

"I was going," she said, "to school. And not to learn how to lecture on music, little woman! Something quite different."

"Yes," I said.

"Do you? You can't. None of you can, not even Ude; he's a paper-pusher. I wasn't; I would've learned how to kill him with my bare hands, I would have learned to make explosives—yes, even here! I would've learned how to find the right stuff and make them—and when I was finished there wasn't one of you who would have dared to come within twenty meters of me, let me tell you—and Alan would be dead."

She pulled angrily at the grass before her, which may poison us.

"I'd love to see that other-fucker with a broken neck," she said.

I laughed—suddenly couldn't help it. She sprang to her feet. "Two minds with but a single thought," I said. She sat down; very slowly, but she sat down. Loosened a little.

Nathalie smiled.

"If only we had some—" said I.

"Plaster," she added, "and wax, we could—"

"Make a cast—"

"Of his—"

She laughed; in fact she roared, throwing her head back. Then she said:

"And a sperm bank." Very sober.

"There is that," I admitted.

A short silence.

"How was Victor?" I said.

"What?" said she. "D'you mean, was he fertile?" (They had looked at it from different viewpoints, apparently.)

She added sharply, "How is he? He's dead!"

I stared at the ground. Earth, grass, pebbles: could've been anywhere.

Nathalie got up. "You see, one goes on," she said. "Unless of

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course one's afraid, like you. One learns that."

"Afraid?" I said.

"Yes." She strode to the pit, reached over the edge for the shovel, then straightened up and bent the thing until the handle clicked back together. With her left hand she pushed her hair behind her ears. "You're demoralized, like all civilians," she said. "You miss your luxuries."

She shoveled a spadeful of earth out on to the bank, tucked her hair behind her ears again (it always came loose and swung in her face), and leaned on the shovel: bitter, severe, very pleased with herself. She said:

"My parents were poorer than Cassie's. Did you know that? Of course not. But that's why you all need me, because I know how to fight. I didn't grow up in private, like that damn-fool little girl and I didn't grow up rich. I was in a youth group and I learned how to fight. You're bloody lucky you've got me."

I said, "You won a lot of scholarships, didn't you?" but she didn't like my guessing it and went back to digging, with her face set as if every bash at the dirt were at Alan-Bobby's backbone.

I said, "Survival—" and she said, "Survival's the name of the game. You'd better move; I'm switching to this side." So I did.

But for what? The sound of the digging stopped; Nathalie had straightened up and was looking at me again, the death's head.

I had spoken out loud.

I said, "All right, all right, I didn't say it!" and scrambled to my feet. This is crazy comedy; one must, after all, do it sooner or later, and the madwoman in black is going to hit me with her shovel or fling it at my head because I want to get right in my soul before I die.

She said, "You walking cunt, I would like to kill you too."

Her face is blanched to the color of paper; her eyes are black and white; all pupil. She's quite mad. If I shoot her, the others will come running. I said, "I'll dig," and she threw me the shovel, which did indeed almost hit me. I rapped the hinge to make sure it wouldn't fold up. Nathalie strode away over the freshly-turned dirt, head high, blazing, broadcasting hatred. "It suits you!" she cried, meaning (I suppose) that grave-digging was my proper occupation. (It used to be taboo, like executioners.) I dug at the channel—a little sloppily, for I haven't half her purpose—and you don't develop strength by being told off to play cards with Lori. They had, at least, the sense to put the latrine downstream, though the odd thing about this hole is that nobody is ever going to use it.

Did you know that hangmen were once taboo?

What do you know?

Do you know anything?

* * *
* * *
* * *

Who are you?

* * *

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(I should go back and erase all that silence; the vocoder makes a mark whenever I stop, like a punctuation mark but different; then it begins a new line. There must be too many of them. No, hell, let them stay.) What happened later: we had our siesta; we dug some more; Lori asked me to sing-and I did, the sun hanging in the sky, dropping no lower, remaining motionless over the same inky, fiery, spotted bush. Silhouettes. The same long shadows from dawn to dusk. I sant "Chu Chu Chu;" I sang "Love Is Splendid, Isn't it!" I sang "What A Perfect Day This Has Been." Ude had a long conversation with Alan, who is becoming more and more authoritative and more and more pleased with himself. They spoke in low voices; I couldn't hear what they said. Making plans?

(We lay down to sleep.)

* * *

By writ and tort, by hullaballoo and brouhaha, I declare this tapedeck locked to all voice-prints but mine, *re* playback, locked *re* printout, and may God have mercy on your soul.

So be it.

* * *

Day twenty. Eighteen. Nineteen? I can't remember. Too much going on. Managing people is a melancholy skill; it depends mostly on keeping your mouth shut.

The night after we'd buried Victor Graham I took off with the broom and the face-mask, making up a package of food, soap, a mattress, bits of plastic towelling, spare underwear, things like that, all tied up in a sheet with one set of corners tied above the other.

I went upstream. I got up in the middle of the night and used up the last of my sleepydust, spraying them as if I'd been putting *Grow* on plants, tomato beds perhaps, stepping carefully between them as you would between your eggplants or your canteloupe vines, then taking the broomstick low above the water, for the ground-effect leaves a trail: some crushed things don't rise and over bare earth there's a characteristic sort of smudge: loose stuff blown to both sides like a giant broom. So they might find me.

I went up two hundred and forty kilometers, until I hurt all over, until the river cut between sharper and sharper hills like glacial debris and glacial scar: an old garbage-heap that glaciers push in front of them and leave behind when they retreat. Until the river went down between two hills and vanished, down into the ground.

I found a cave. The drop to the water: twenty meters, the other bank almost flat. A streamlet three fingers across rising in the loose rock-rubble in the back and making straight for the edge, with the necessary number of curlicues to avoid stones and hillocks. Beyond, a steep hill, covered with thorny tangle, something new, like blackberry vines, and the cave not really a cave but an accidental hole-in-a-heap with boulders wedged together and stuff grown over the top. But very big, very solid boulders. The streamlet-bottom is pebbles, fine gravel. I put

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everything down and poked assiduously in the rubbish in back with the broomstick handle and even lit a fire with some of the litter I found outside, thrusting burning stuff into the back of the cave in several places.

Nothing. No alarums and excursions, no nasty little dwellers with pincers, no alarmed rustlings, no sound, no motion.

So there's only people.

I'm about one-point-fifty meters tall; the cave is about one-point-sixty-five and I like that. Tall people can't stand upright here. I propped the broomstick against the drift of friable rock and harder pebbles at the back, put down my hobo's bundle, unrolled the mattress, and laid my things out. The extra underwear I'd put in the metal box I once used to store my music tapes; this is where the vocoder print-out will go (when I make a print-out). I guess we will bury it. There was room for my mattress at the edge, to one side of the little, bisecting stream: bed, running water, and I can hear in the directions I can't see. The streamlet makes almost no noise: too tiny. Wonderful for sanitation. And it didn't kill me. I had gone 240 kilometers, perhaps one hundred sixty as the crow flies (none here), and that's six or seven days' walking for exceedingly determined people.

And that is why I carried nine days' food.

* * *

But I lost track. I thought they'd gone away. I went out scouting with the broomstick and saw no one, not from the tops of the highest hills. I couldn't go too far or I'd lose my way back—until I thought of spreading some underwear under two rocks; you can see the white very far.

There was nobody coming, no black specks, no swaying in the bushes, not even three-quarters of the way down the river. It was altogether beautiful. But I couldn't go any closer. Wouldn't. Didn't want to. Didn't dare.

So I lost track.

* * *

They came in the afternoon. Putting one's head down close to the stream, you can just barely hear it talking, but I think I screened out everything else with the river because I never heard them. I woke from a dream of talking very rationally to Cassie somewhere utterly indistinct and uncharacterized (so that it might have been equally easily back on the ship or in the middle of the Grand Canyon) and there she was, standing in silhouette in the door of the cave; I was mucking about in the floating layers between light sleep and lighter sleep when you become aware of your body and don't want to, like anesthetic: places in the mattress that weren't as thick as they should be. Stretching. Stiff back.

I said, "Why have you come for the water thingie? I left it."

I woke up.

Why didn't they come in? Because they couldn't see in, probably. I had thought Cassie was al-

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ready inside, but as my vision came back I realized I'd only been asleep; everything's flat for a moment after you wake up.

I said, conversationally, "How'd you find me?"

She said, "I want to talk to you. Can I come in?" Brave Cassandra!—whose shaky voice indicated something else was going on. Probably Alan-Bobby exploring the hillside. There are heavy scramblings overhead, something rather large and stupid moving about on the cave roof. Either he's proving himself for Lori or (more likely) they decided he was It.

I propped the mattress (which is very thin and light) against the rock-rubble at the back of the cave; don't want to trip on it.

I said, "Good Lord, you didn't bring Lori, did you?"

"No, she's with Val." So it's Val now. I said, "I don't know what you're doing here and I don't know what you want of me. Go away."

She said, "Can't you come out for a minute?"

I let a moment go by. "All right," I said. I suppose one of us has to act in good faith that the other is in good faith, slender as such a chance may be. Let's test it. I put on my jacket, picked up a couple of rocks about the size of my hand. Circled close to the cave wall, on the side Cass was on so she couldn't see me, watching my feet carefully, and made it almost to the entrance without making too much noise. Which I hoped sounded like echoes, anyhow. Still in shadow. I threw one of the rocks across the cave and it made a very satisfactory, verisimilar sort of sound, falling in the loose shale over there, and there was a truly tremendous scramble from above, as Alan-Bobby the Megatherium dropped from the cave roof and rushed inside.

And bashed his head against the ceiling. He does not realize, I think, just how expendable the others consider him to be. On his hands and knees, shaking his head from side to side. Then he fell into the streamlet. He couldn't see very well, of course. And the others might not have told him to do this; he might be acting on his own. It's possible. I threw the other rock at the back of the cave and when he turned to follow the sound of where it landed—I think he was still dizzy—I had meant to give him a shot of something. I did. I really did. But there was no time. And I knew I must not let him touch me; then he'd know where I was. So I picked up another rock, picking up something in my head that wasn't mine, too, that I still don't know, and before he could get up, I hit him down and down again, just above the ear.

Concussion, at best.

So there's no going back.

"Alan?" said Cassie.

Nathalie, John, Cassie. If no Val. I kept quiet. Cassie stepped out of my view and there was some sort of parley out there, little whisperings and scufflings about.

"Hello in there!" said John Ude.

I said nothing, "What do you want" being a question that in this case seemed rather obvious.

"Hello?" he said.

I cried, "You've got the water-

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cycler, for God's sake, you've got it!"

He said, "But we want you back. We like your singing."

I said, "John, I only want to be by myself. I'll give you the broomstick; I can push it out."

"Alan?" said someone, a woman's voice.

"Hibernating," I said. "Out like a light. Your Hero bashed his head against the ceiling, which is very low. Showing his usual intelligence, which is likewise. If you'll stand away from the entrance, I'll push out the broomstick. No. I'll break it, that's better. Ruin it. Push out the pieces. That way nobody has it, you see?" There's probably someone else on the roof, but I can't see the shadow. If I were there myself, I'd wait until I saw somebody come out, then jump them, maybe push them off the edge. There's an old trick with a hat, but I haven't got a hat. My ears all on edge waiting to hear Alan-Bobby stir, wishing he would, wishing he wouldn't. I said, "Stand where I can see you."

Cassie moved into view in the cave opening on one side, Ude on the other.

"And. . .?" (said I)

"Nath is ill," he said. "We left her back home." Back *home*! And Val and Nath and Cass—what a lot of intimacy has been developing in the last few days! I decided to believe him, or pretend that I believed him, or act as if I were pretending that I did believe him. If there's a fight, I might get broken. So I stepped into the sunlight at the mouth of the cave—but not quite out—until my eyes got accustomed to the light; it was a shock to see them looking so grubby, so angry. They must've been drinking river water on the long march up.

I said foolishly, "What've you been drinking?"

"The same as you," said John Ude, "see?" and he held up something that caught the sun and sparkled wonderfully. "Compass," he said. "Bet you didn't know. There's a magnetic field, all right. And you forgot that Nath was up this way before. We came overland." Then he yelled "Now!" and somebody dropped on me from above as he grabbed me, both together, Nathalie undoubtedly because it smelled like her, not that I'd ever noticed before. Fallen on sloppily, *thus*! with my face in the dust because I hadn't had the sense to duck, and thinking only it was so odd that I did know what Nathalie smelled like.

"Let her up," said Ude. Big man. "Cass, go get Alan." So I suppose Cassie went inside. I was not going to turn around to see; don't want to get my back to the edge. I heard her moving around tentatively in there. Looked up so very carefully, hugging the ground: the woman to one side, the man to the other. Two bureaucrats. Looking up makes me dizzy.

I started to cry. Because we never could be friends, I suppose. Cassie would be blinded by the dark, but not for long. There wasn't much time. He leaned over me, the silly way you do when you think you've got somebody down; he put his hands on his hips and with as much angry relish as if he'd been talking to the whole damned planet itself, he said, "You're mad. Did

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you know that? We're going to tie you to a tree with your hands behind so you can't get loose. We can never trust you again."

I pulled his feet out from under him. He sat, or went down backwards along the ledge (I don't know which) and I turned and shot in Nathalie's direction, not even seeing her, not knowing if it would miss her or not.

But she was awfully close.

Gas-guns don't make noise.

I shot at him without seeing him. Following my motion with my eyes a moment later to see him—I think he was hit in the knee or something—clutching one thigh and standing on the other foot. There was a great roar behind me, pebbles and boulders going over the edge down the bank. I shot him again, aiming this time, and—once he fell—kicked him down the slope. Another landslide.

There was no one on top of the cave, no one on the hill. I suppose Val really hadn't come. I felt even dizzier and waited on the empty ledge without standing up for Cass to come out with the broomstick, or discover Alan with his head beaten in and scream—and was he alive? And what would she do? And what would I do then?

She came out empty-handed. No, with a rock in one hand. Blood on it. She dropped it to the ground with exaggerated calm, wiped her hands on her sheet-made-into-a-dress, and sat down cross-legged on the bare earth, which she did with astonishing gracefulness. Something to do with having been a dancer once, I suppose. Anyway, Cassie hadn't wasted love on any of them.

"Well!" she said, peering over the edge, "you have been going it, haven't you? Someone ought to give you a medal." She licked her index finger, then tapped her own shoulder with her third finger. "Run home before it dries."

I said nothing.

She remarked conversationally, "The prof person said you'd be up here. You know, along the water somewhere. Frankly, you should have gone a lot farther away. That's what I would have done. I told them to let you alone."

I said, "Cassandra—"

She said, "I know, I know. If I had a baby, it would die. And if it didn't, I would die. Anyway, my Mama had me by Caesarean."

She said, "I could tell you all about it, the kind of anesthetic, the scars, the stitches. God knows I heard about it enough." She laughed. Swaggering Cassandra, the beautiful waitress, born to be a star, born to be a loser, doesn't know that hard births don't run in families. Not as simply as that.

"Oh damn them!" she said, "damn them, don't they ever even come back to *look?*"

I shook my head.

She said, "What do we do now? Fight to the death? Like stupid Nathalie, who thought she was a man?" A social solecism Valeria Victrix would never have perpetrated, despite her being a Mrs. But in Cassie's terms Cassie is right, I suppose.

"Here," she said harshly, making me jump, "give me that," and reaching out in an absurdly unbalanced position, she had the gas-gun in her hand and was trying to get

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her fingers round it. It's a flat, half-shapeless piece, because it's designed to be hidden, and you have to know how to use it. I shut my eyes. "Careful!" Not like this.

"Give me that stuff," said Cassandra the brava. "Right now."

"What?" I said, opening my eyes.

"That stuff you're always carrying," she said sharply. "You've got it about you somewhere. You're too much of a coward to be without it." She turned red. "Trust you not to go around without carrying every kind of poison there is, you viper! Alwants wants a way out, doesn't she? Give it!"

So I did. I popped from my belt two pellets, which I put on the ground between us under those angry, angry eyes, two greenish-grey, extra-special, euphoric exits that looked just like Cassie's eyes. They fetched a great deal in the market once. And are fetching a great deal right now.

I said, "Please don't throw that down." I meant the gun. She put it more carefully down in the dust between us. I watched her pick up the pills. I think I was shaking. Something—not me—said, "Cassandra, I would be very pleased to share your company. Very grateful."

"I ought to poison your water," she said, "but I won't. I'll go do it somewhere else. What do you do? Swallow them?"

I nodded. She was showing off again, Cassie the 3-D Cat, Cassie the actress.

"Now you can go kill Lori," she said. She started to pick her way sideways over the hill, a little ageing in her imitation peplum or whatever it was. Then she stopped, and turned back, and smiled.

"Honored to share my company, huh?" she said. She added:

"For how many years?"

Then she went away.

* * *

Alan-Bobby was dead. No pulse in his groin, no chest movement. I used the broomstick to haul Nathalie's and John Ude's bodies from the stream-bed, one at a time, and take them a good km. or so downstream; they could rot there. Dead people are like sandbags but in odd shapes because they keep folding up, and because they were still warm; I kept getting irritated at them for flinging their arms and legs out like that and not helping me. I think that's characteristic. I left Alan alone, because I was tired, and decided to go downstream. From high enough (I was not stuck with the water now) you can see the river winding like a silver snake in the distance and the grey-green brush folded over on itself in hill after hill, each darker and stranger than the last, plum-colored at the horizon. League upon league. A rumpled, painted tablecloth where the glaciers had come down. I went down by the side of the stream this time and much straighter, leaving a snake of flattened vegetation over the hills. Watch it after you pass and you can see it slowly straighten up.

I had to go down.

Otherwise they might have to decide to come up to me.

TO BE CONTINUED

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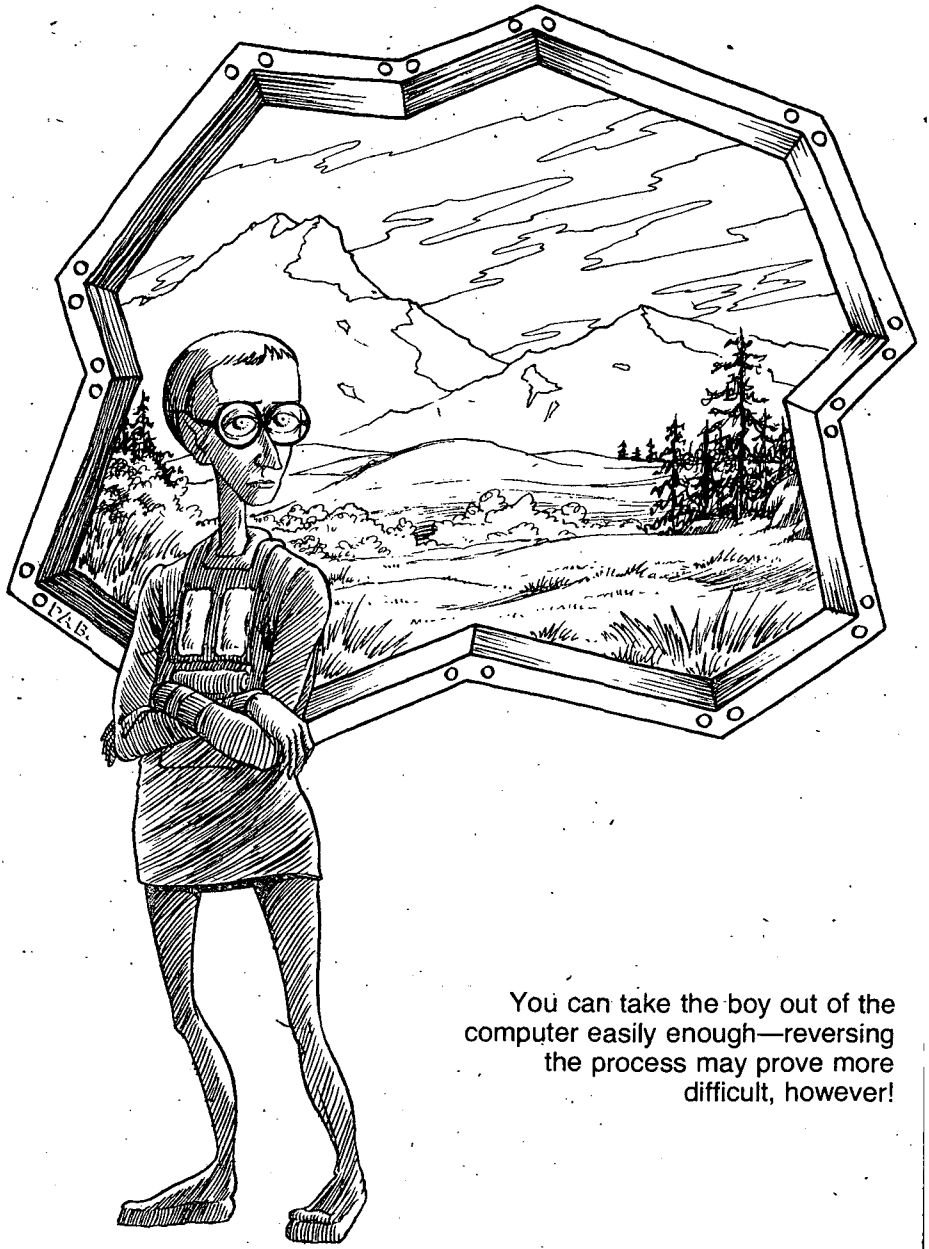

You can take the boy out of the computer easily enough—reversing the process may prove more difficult, however!

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SPIDER ROBINSON

IT'S A SUNNY DAY

"SIGN HERE."

Zack looked a bit dubiously at the bespectacled boy who sat surrounded by travelcases in the middle of his kitchen, then at the silent giant who had carried in the travelcases, finally at the bald slender man who had spoken. The latter held out a clipboard and stylus in his pale hand. His voice was flat and emotionless, and he wore grey—Zack decided it suited him.

"Glad to, Mr. . . ."

"Jacob Abernathy," the grey man said, seeming to bite off the words.

He glanced around the room in apparent disapproval.

"Pleased to meet you, Jake. I'm . . ."

"I know who you are." Zack had stuck out his hand; Abernathy gazed at it without particular interest. Zack took the clipboard with it and made his chop, handed it back.

"You tell Raoul that I'll take good care of his . . ."

"His Excellency will be informed that you have accepted delivery," Abernathy clipped. Zack blinked. He adjusted his overalls on one broad shoulder and took his pipe from one of many pockets. Locating a pouch in another, he stoked up and emitted clouds of blue smoke, squinting at Abernathy. "You just do that, brother. Sorry you can't stay for lunch."

The sarcasm was lost on Aber-

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nathy. "Food is available on board the ship."

"What you call food, yeah. Good day to you." Abernathy nodded and left, followed by the huge manservant. Zack went to the window and watched them depart, puffing on his pipe. "Never seen a shirt so stuffed mass so little," he murmured, and shook his head, eyes twinkling.

He turned back to the boy who still sat silently amid his belongings in the rich, butter-yellow sunlight of early morning. The plunder nearly filled half the kitchen, pressure-tight suitcases designed to withstand sudden vacuum. Zack ran a calloused hand through his thick wiry red hair and grinned around his pipe at the youth.

"Sure a lot of swag, old son," he drawled. "You too proud to shake hands too?"

The boy shook his head, rose from his seat. "I'm Timeth Connery," he said, his thin voice as emotionless as Abernathy's. Zack shook his hand gravely.

"I am Zachary Mountain-Born, and this is the T.A., my home."

The boy's bland expression—or absence of any—changed slightly. "Mountain-Born?" he asked. "What kind of last name is that?"

"Why, mine," said Zack, somewhat startled.

"A surname is functional, an identifier," Timeth said, seeming to recite. "It is a family-referent and locator. Was your father also named Mountain-Born?"

"Why no. My father was Jody Sunray and my mother was Kerry Maplewood. We like to use surnames creatively here on New Home."

The boy digested this. Zack imagined lights blinking, chided his imagination sharply.

"What does 'T.A.' stand for?"

" 'Total Anarchy,' " Zack said grinning. "This house was built by Daniel, one of the First Landed, later called Daniel of the Woods. He ceremonially destroyed his T-square before beginning this place: there isn't a right angle in the building." He realized his grin was unshared, felt foolish. "Don't you understand jokes?"

"I understand the theory and purpose of jokes," Timeth replied. "Was that one?"

Zack blinked, then suddenly burst out laughing. "Guess you couldn't be expected to appreciate a joke about anarchy at that, Tim. Not coming from a world like Velco. Well, never mind. You'll find things here to make you laugh. I hope."

Timeth regarded him intently, seeming to size Zack up—he had the feeling the lad could tell his shirt-size and annual income. "One of the standard purposes of the 'joke' is to make another feel at ease," Timeth stated. "Was that your wish?"

"It surely was," Zack assured him.

"Then tell me why I am here."

Zack started, then his brow

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clouded. "Well I'll be a . . . do you mean to tell me they didn't *explain* to you why you're here?" The boy shook his head. "Might have expected it—pure Velco," Zack exploded, and swore. "I thought better of Raoul." He saw Timeth looking at him, waiting. "I'm sorry, old son. Didn't mean to criticize your father; I knew him in college. But to truck you thirty parsecs and leave you in a stranger's kitchen with never a word of why . . ." He shook his head. "Let's sit down."

He led Timeth from the kitchen to his broad-beamed living room, just a bit of prideful expectancy in his manner. He had added some to Daniel's original structure, and the living room was his showpiece.

A visitor's first impression was usually that a rainbow had been trapped in the room and battered itself to pieces trying to escape: while the great south window gave a clear view of the mountain sloping away to an azure bay, the east and west windows were stained glass mosaic, and the former of these now spangled the room with splashes of red and yellow and green and deep, rich blue. Zack watched Timeth for reaction, found none. He sighed, pointed to a chair and draped his own long, hard form on a rocker. He busied himself for awhile with his pipe, then fired up a fresh bowl and began.

"The way I get the story, Timeth—and you correct me if I'm wrong anywhere—Velco is in a hell

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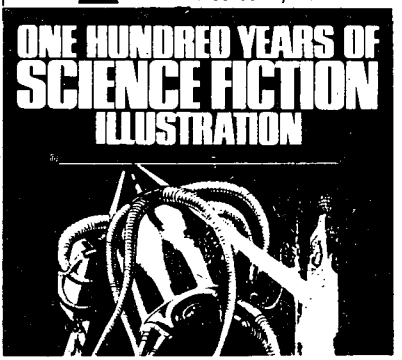

of a pickle. Overpopulated, overindustrialized, overurbanized—just one big city, the way I hear it. They failed to learn the lessons of Old Terra, and so they got into a bind for efficient administration. Too much information to integrate. Computers weren't the answer, they don't correlate well enough. A computer can have the results of five different medical teams around a planet punched into it, and never see that, combined, those results mean a cure for Ashton's Disease—or whatever. So the Velcoi fastened on an ancient but untried notion from Old Terra, attributed to a man named Heinlein, made about the time that it stopped

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being possible for a normal man to absorb all known information in a single lifetime. They began tinkering with ova *in utero*, selecting for eidetic memory, and set about raising up a corps of encyclopedic synthesists: a group of men trained to absorb raw information at high input with perfect retention, and then reason from it. Sort of human computers; you're one of the first.

"They tell me you can read a page at a glance, Basic English or Fortran, and remember it a decade from now, letter-perfect in a cafe with the band playing. You know enough to converse intelligently with experts in a hundred specialized disciplines, and direct their work for maximum efficiency. They trained and sleep-taught and indoctrinated you in logical and non-logical analysis until you were eight, stuffed you with data until you were twelve, gave you four years to integrate it and then put you to work at sixteen. Only you didn't work.

"Not the way they hoped, anyhow. They fed you data on pressing social problems, not big stuff, just break-in exercises; and your solutions were unsatisfactory or barely so, not much better than the computers could do. So they sicced their psychiatrists on you, and their psychologists, and they turned you inside out and found nothing wrong. They tore you down and rebuilt you and you still don't make miracles. And so in desperation some would-be Freud stole another notion from Old Terra and recommended a vacation in the country—in this case a vacation on New Home, an agricultural colony world, with me." Zack paused, relit his pipe. "I knew your Dad—we were roommates in school on Trantor, and he told me a lot about the *YES* program—Young Encyclopedic Synthesists. He was mighty proud that his wife back home had been selected for genetic surgery. Wonder how he feels now." He stared at the distant bay below, then wrenched himself from his thoughts with a visible effort. "Anyway, that's the long and short of it, Tim. You're here for R and R—six months of it. How does that appeal to you?"

Behind his enormous spectacles (which could be returned to fisheye lens for maximum optic input) Timeth regarded Zack gravely. "It is satisfactory."

"I said, 'Does it *appeal* to you?' Do you *like* the notion?"

For the first time Timeth hesitated. "Y . . . yes I do. The last few months have been . . . intensely strenuous."

"And strenuously intense, if I know Velcoi shrinks," Zack snorted. "Well, that's all over for awhile, lad. Smile." He beamed himself, nodded at the south window. "It's a sunny day."

Timeth looked out at sun-drenched splendor, at stately maples which had crossed light-years as sap-

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lings and at native spruce whose skirts danced in the mountain breeze, and returned his gaze to Zack. "There is no more sun than on any other day. I fail to understand your pleasure simply because it's visible . . . oh, I see. As a farmer you are pleased that maximum growth-frequencies are available to your crops."

"Why, no," said Zack, startled. "I mean, that's all fine, but . . . but . . ." He broke off, words failing him, and pointed at the window again. "*Look*. It's a *sunny day*."

The boy looked, kept on looking.

"You ought to appreciate it: you haven't seen many, have you? I hear Velco is completely roofed over, to simplify atmosphere recycling. Must use artificial light, right?"

"Sunlight is relayed inside the city by a series of mirror-bank transfer-and-amplification complexes," Timeth said flatly. "Vitamin D is essential for health."

Zack's jaw dropped; he lost his pipe. *They literally pipe daylight in to 'em,* he thought. *Holy smoke, what a dungeon.*

He gave up, took refuge in manners-toward-a-houseguest. The T.A. held five bedrooms, four of which he customarily sealed off in winter to conserve heat. Although Autumn already lay on this quadrant of New Home, he had left all five open, and invited Timeth to take his pick. All were furnished and clean but not especially orderly: Zack had felt that a newcomer would feel most welcome in a room that felt lived-in. The boy selected the smallest and most functional room, hardly more than a square box with a mattress on the floor and a small table. It had no window. Zack shrugged and carried in the travel-cases, stacking them for maximum access. Timeth opened one of the seals with an economical movement of his small thin hand, and began removing toilet articles. "What are my duties?" he asked stiffly.

Well, if I'm supposed to find out what's wrong with his working habits . . . "None at all," Zack said cheerfully. "Do what suits you—or nothing. Any help you feel like giving will be appreciated, but you owe me none. Your father paid your rent for you, twenty years ago—by teaching astrogational mechanics to an ignorant farmer of a roomate."

Timeth stared. "I cannot solve a problem without parameters," he stated.

"Just keep your eyes open, old son. You'll catch on," Zack assured him heartily. He hoped that he sounded more confident than he felt.

* * *

The next few days passed slowly, grey weather hiding the sun, and Zack's puzzlement increased daily. Timeth indeed found things to do, and did them with maximum efficiency, but his performance was

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consistently lackluster.

Sent to fetch water from the stream while Zack repaired a water-pump which had slipped its leathers, he reappeared from the forest staggering under the weight of two buckets fuller than Zack would have filled them, struggling valiantly uphill. He was frustrated by his inability to deliver perfectly full buckets, and shed tears approximately equal in volume to the amount spilled.

Partly soothed by Zack's assurance that he had fetched a-plenty, he set about cutting up onions for the midday stew—and produced precise cubes of onion as uniform as his small hands could make them.

When Zack mentioned, casually, that they could use some firewood, he was shortly startled by the stuttering roar of his ancient chainsaw—a device of which he was certain Timeth had only empirical knowledge. He had expected the lad would use the pulp saw which hung in the woodshed. Leaving his cooking and wandering outside to investigate, he found Timeth in a silent rage, annoyed not by the enormous demand the snarling, bucking chainsaw put on his young arms, but by the refusal of the irregular logs to lie down neatly and be sawed. *Probably never met with a piece of unplaned wood in his life,* Zack thought, and tried to explain that the logs' tendency to leap from the sawhorse and savage one's knees was an interesting challenge rather than a defect in their structure, but he had little success—Timeth's early training had led him to define "challenge" as "a problem they don't expect me to be able to solve." The boy went grimly back to work, generating a mountain of firewood as neat as a postcard-picture but no joy. Zack shook his head, sighed for the dozenth time and went back inside.

The uneasiness persisted as the grey, rainy days of the season continued to unfold, and Zack lay awake nights trying to put his finger on the problem. The boy played chess like an automation, winning consistently and emotionlessly, continued to perform household tasks adequately but with an undercurrent of feeling that might have been sullenness had it not been so mild. He never roamed the mountain, though a forest environment was certainly new to him, and seemed uncomfortable when he could not find a task to accomplish, a problem to solve. Even his constant displays of encyclopedic knowledge, which saved Zack man-hours on several occasions, contained no tinge of pride, but only a weary boredom. Damn it, the boy simply had no juice. Could it be simply homesickness?

One damp morning Timeth coughed after breakfast, and asked diffidently if he could have his bed off the floor. "I keep hearing the floor hum," he said. Under questioning he explained that floors on

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Velco invariably hummed with power, the electronic systems which were the city-world's lifeblood pulsing beneath floorboards. By association he heard them here on New Home, and a psychosomatic annoyance is as real as any other. Zack assented readily, and they studied the three bedframes the T.A. held.

"Doesn't look like any of these will fit through the door of that closet you picked to live in, Timi. I guess you'll have to build you a bed." Zack expected the boy to ask for help, as he was sure carpentry was not a skill Timeth could have acquired on a steel-and-plastic world, but the boy only nodded and started measuring the mattress. Zack busied himself with the dishes, observing unobtrusively out of the corner of his eye. Having obtained the dimensions, Timeth put on a coat and went out into the morning mists, to the lumber pile out back. He returned with a pair of tongue-and-groove boards, repeated the process until he had stacked a dozen of them in his room, then fetched two long two-by-fours and four four-by-fours. Zack interrupted his labors to provide hammer, nails and handsaw, then returned to the kitchen. As always, the boy worked in silence, save for the pounding and sawing the job required. Zack let him be, spent the afternoon cleaning his survey-laser.

At noon Timeth emerged, his spectacles coated with a fine spray of sawdust. Zack left off caning a chair, one of his favorite forms of relaxation, and went to inspect the new bedframe, easing past the mattress that partially filled the doorway. He blinked at what he saw, said nothing at first.

"I'm not certain the legs are really perpendicular," Timeth said uneasily. "I didn't have a level or a T-square."

" 'How do you tell if your wife is true?' " Zack quoted. " 'Check her out with a plumb-bob.' Never mind, old son. Another of my bum jokes. About the bed: it's . . . it's very functional."

They boy looked pleased.

. . . but I can't say that I like it."

Science-Fiction Studies #7
Nov 1975, 6 x 9, 100 typeset pages

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This special issue (#7), $3.00 via surface mail, $4.00 via air mail. Subscription to ##7-8-9-10 (November 1975, March, July, November 1976), $8.00 via surface mail, $12.00 via air mail. (All remittances must be in US funds.)

Edited by R.D. Mullen and Darko Suvin, with Stanislaw Lem as contributing editor.

Science-Fiction Studies
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Timeth was briefly crestfallen, then his features smoothed into their usual blank. "Why not?"

Zack started to answer, then stopped. He turned and walked into the living room, the boy following, and sat down with a frown. Timeth waited.

After a time Zack spoke. "Timeth, I'm beginning to understand why you had trouble on Velco. Hell, it sticks out all over—it's so obvious I couldn't grasp it."

"You must tell me," the boy said, and Zack was startled by the intensity in his voice.

"Why *must* I tell you, Timi?" he asked softly.

"Because I have shamed my father," Timi said shortly, turning red. For him, it was an emotional outburst.

Zack swore, with feeling. "You poor kid. They couldn't get the results they wanted out of you, so they applied pressure on your motivation circuits, figuring you were stubborn. And so they made you ashamed—and that's one of the stubbornest places there is. Perpetuated their own problem. Serves them right—but it doesn't serve *you* at all.

"Listen, lad. You've been programmed for maximum efficiency. But as much as your father and that Abernathy creature would like to believe otherwise, people aren't built to be satisfied with merely efficient solutions to their problems. Suited, maybe, but not satisfied. People are irrational, Timeth, in a way you've never been allowed to be. They want to enjoy life."

Timeth displayed no comprehension.

"Take that bed you just built. You went to the lumber-pile and picked up the first bunch of boards that fit your parameters, the right size, the right length. And you stopped looking. You figured out the most economical use of wood and nails and designed your bedframe. And stopped thinking. You fit the tongue-and-grooves together, spanned them with two-by-fours to distribute the load, and added legs. And stopped building. It'll hold your weight and it's the size of the mattress, but it's as spartan as a K-ration, as cheerless as a utility pole. It's functional, but that's all it is."

The boy looked close to tears. Zack suspected that he was having his equivalent of hysterics, but pushed on anyway. "I know what your problem is, Timeth, and it's the problem with your whole world: the reason why they needed you to pull their chestnuts out of the fire in the first place and the reason why you can't do it, all in one.

"Look: a certain number of chores must be done in order to live—call it life support. Because your world is so confounded crowded the nature of those chores become complex and subtle—from hydraulic engineering to solar power conversion to piping in the bloody

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daylight. All I need is food and firewood, so I'm not as pressured. But when life-support chores become too complex to allow for the kind of cheerful inefficiency with which I run this farm, people don't enjoy doing them, or living with the end-results.

"Look at my kitchen-stove sometime. It's a wood-burner, as old as underwear and as big as a landing-field. It keeps me busy wrestling that chainsaw, and its not an especially efficient heat-source. I make a pretty good living from this farm—I could afford gas. Hell, I could afford a solar stove. But I *like* that old heap of iron. It was my mother's; it has stains on it that she made fixing my school lunches. It keeps the room cheery and warm of a winter's night. I don't *have* to cut wood for it—so I don't begrudge the energy it consumes.

"But more important than that, Timeth, the chores that I do have immediate personal results, of a tangible sort. I spend an hour cutting up vegetables into interesting shapes instead of neat cubes, and somehow my soup tastes better to me, and it looks different every time. I spend a few weeks over at Yang Wildflower's house learning to blow glass, and my living room wears a coat of many colors that changes as the day goes by, and changes with the seasons, too. I make the upstairs dormer I put on this house much wider than I *need* it—but I can sit in the window-sill with my feet up, come sundown, and watch the sun set over the bay that my father used to fish.

"*You* spend a week of hard mental labor and produce a more efficient traffic-routing system for use halfway around the planet, or a step-up in distribution of goods you'll never see. Meanwhile your own life-support comes from cans and boxes and grilles in the ceiling, from supermarkets and factories rather than from the earth and sky. You don't *feel* the effect you have on your world, and so it is meaningless to you. No wonder your solutions don't satisfy your constituents.

"Go look at my bed; you've seen it already. Big four-poster with a canopy overhead made from a genuine Carson's World tapestry and a tape-viewer built in. Stereo speakers in a headboard of gnurled oak that's got a gold sunburst painted in the middle. That bed doesn't just hold me off the floor—it gives me pleasure. Sometimes it's hard to get out of it in the morning. Sometimes I don't.

"Dammit, son, there's some driftwood that you didn't get to, out there on the lumber pile, that'd make the prettiest bedframe you ever saw, with more interesting contours than any straight line ever milled. There's one big slab that bay worked over for near a century, with that smooth, timeless texture that only driftwood has, that'd make a headboard as majestic as this

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mountain we're sitting on. And as asymmetrical—so you never noticed it. Instead of a pleasing place to spend a third of your every day, you produced a piece of floor with legs on it. Instead of an interesting soup you produced a homogenous pot of cubes. Instead of a lived-in room you've produced a collection of right angles that's as efficient and as lifeless as a laboratory maze.

"Function, function, function! Timeth, human beings aren't built to live functionally. Durn near everything in this house, from kettle to cupboard, is decorated some way or other, and so the house is full of *me*. If I'm an unimaginative man, then they're unimaginative decorations, but they satisfy me and they say who I am. Your room says only what Velco is.

"Confound it, boy! Didn't anyone ever teach you how to *enjoy* yourself?"

Timeth burst out crying, the great, racking sobs of a very small child or a grown man. Zack suddenly cursed himself for a fool. Rising, he held out his arms blindly, and the boy as blindly rushed into them. "You poor slob," he murmured, stroking Timeth's hair, "They trained you how to work like a ballerina—and they never taught you how to play." His face darkened. "I guess you can't play . . . if you live on Velco."

The boy's sobs intensified.

But finally his crying became less explosive, began to subside. His trembling ceased. He lifted his face, and the stained glass window turned his tears to tiny diamonds, rubies and amethysts. "Zack," he pleaded, "will you teach me how to enjoy myself?"

Zack was startled to discover that his own vision was blurred; Timeth's face became a small, oval kaleidoscope.

"I'll try, son," he said, his voice hoarse. "I'll try."

* * *

The winter was long, but unseasonably mild. Nonetheless Zack got very little accomplished around the house—but it was a very full time all the same. There were hayrides and fishing trips and husking bees, happy smiling neighbors too seldom seen. There were square-dances where Timeth danced until his legs refused to support him and he giggled, gasping, on his knees at how the mathematical relationships of the dance melted away before the sheer joy of it. There were beer-brewing parties and barn-raising celebrations at which he learned for the first time the joy of cooperation, of shared labor. There was a holiday feast where he glowed at the compliments bestowed on a cake he had fashioned in the shape of the T.A., with frosted windows, icing sills and trim, and a fine-grain chocolate roof for all the world like tar-paper. And there were endless nature walks and countless camping

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trips and a hundred color-splashed sunsets; there were windy days on the shore racking for driftwood and sweet winter nights singing New Home songs and Velcoi ballads by the fireside until eyelids stung with the weight of happy fatigue; there was snow to be shoveled and trees to be felled, a boat to be built and sap to be collected and boiled down into thick, gold syrup.

And one chill night there was a chimney fire and Timeth heard it first and they sprang from their beds to become twin whirlwinds of wordlessly coordinated energy, and there was chopping of timbers and tearing down of boards and Timeth at the pump, with new-grown muscle efficiently pumping, keeping the full buckets coming, and Zack, disheveled and red in the glow of firebox and embers, his great shoulders rippling as he swung the great double-headed axe that Timeth had remembered to snatch up as they raced past the shop; and then there was a policing for embers in which time slowed down some, and then at last Zack and Timeth, panting on their knees, locking eyes for the first time, dissolving into laughter at the same instant, great echoing whoops of laughter that seemed to blow the smoke and the stink from the room; and Zack, reaching out to shake Timeth's hand and saying the first words spoken since Timeth's cry had woken him: "Pleasure to work with you, partner." And the boy's face was something that Jacob Abernathy would not have recognized. . . .

And one slightly warmer night, Timeth returned from three days alone in the woods, healthy and fit and profoundly *alive*, and he asked Zachary Mountain-Born a question, and Zack made the answer which he had prepared.

And one pleasant Spring evening, two weeks later, Zack was sitting alone on a bluff overlooking the garden, watching the stars, when a darkness occulted one of them. The star reappeared and its neighbor vanished, and he smiled a soft smile and went in to bed, sleeping soundly for the first time in a month, waking before dawn for the first time in years.

* * *

The knock came as the coffee was perking, and Zack carefully slid the pot to a cooler place on the stove before he answered the door. Abernathy walked in without greeting, followed by the large manservant, and the three of them stood for a moment, regarding each other. For Zack it was almost a moment of *déja vu*—the same kitchen, the same people, the same stack of travelcases awash with the light of dawning.

But Abernathy methodically assessed the room, identified the missing element, and frowned. "Where is the boy?"

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"The boy is dead," Zack said truthfully. "He will not be returning with you."

Abernathy's planed features had never held emotion, and were not about to start at this late date, but he looked as if he wished his eyebrows would let him frown.

"There was an avalanche last week," Zack explained. "A rockslide to the east. I watched him fall. I could not recover his body. Tell Raoul I . . ." he broke off, strong emotion on his own face.

Abernathy stood stock-still for a long moment, nodded and said, "I see. Was his death your fault?"

"No," Zack said slowly, "it was his own doing."

Abernathy read truth in his sturdy face, and nodded again. Without another word he spun on his heel like a drill instructor and left. The servant followed with the forlorn travelcases.

Zack watched from the window until the landing craft rose into view from the tall neopines at the base of the mountain and arced off over the bay toward the orbiting mothership he had seen in the sky last night. Then he put down his empty coffee cup and went to the smallest room in his house. As he opened its door he noted with approval that the sunburst painted on its door was dry now.

A new-carved, diamond-shaped window let in the morning sun; it splashed across a great majestic bed, seasoned maple timbers and a mighty slab of driftwood for a headboard, held together by careful, macramé-like lashings of thick blue cord, a great canopy arching overhead with a hand-stitched representation of this sector of the galaxy on its undersurface. It was nowise perfect or neat, but its craftsman had obviously enjoyed himself.

Zack coughed. "All clear, old son."

From beneath the magnificent bed came—not a boy—but a young man, the beginning of an eager grim below a proud, new mustache. "They're really gone, Zack?"

"They're really gone, Timeth. They won't be coming back."

"I . . . I guess I'll miss my parents some." The grin faltered.

"I guess you will," Zack agreed, wondering for the thousandth time whether he had chosen rightly.

Timeth shrugged, and his grin returned full strength. "Even feeling bad is better than not feeling," he said positively, and to his own surprise Zack laughed. They embraced for a moment, as comrades-in-arms, and then Timeth pulled away smiling. "Let's go outside, Zack," he said. "There's a shed to be built."

"Whoa, lad. What about breakfast?"

"The hell with breakfast," Timeth said, and raced to the window. Flinging it open, he breathed in a great chestful of spruce and earth and distant sea.

"Look!" he cried, pointing. "It's a sunny day!" ★

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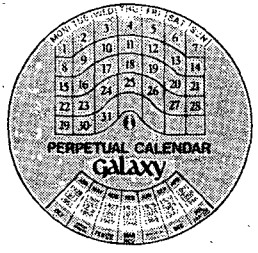

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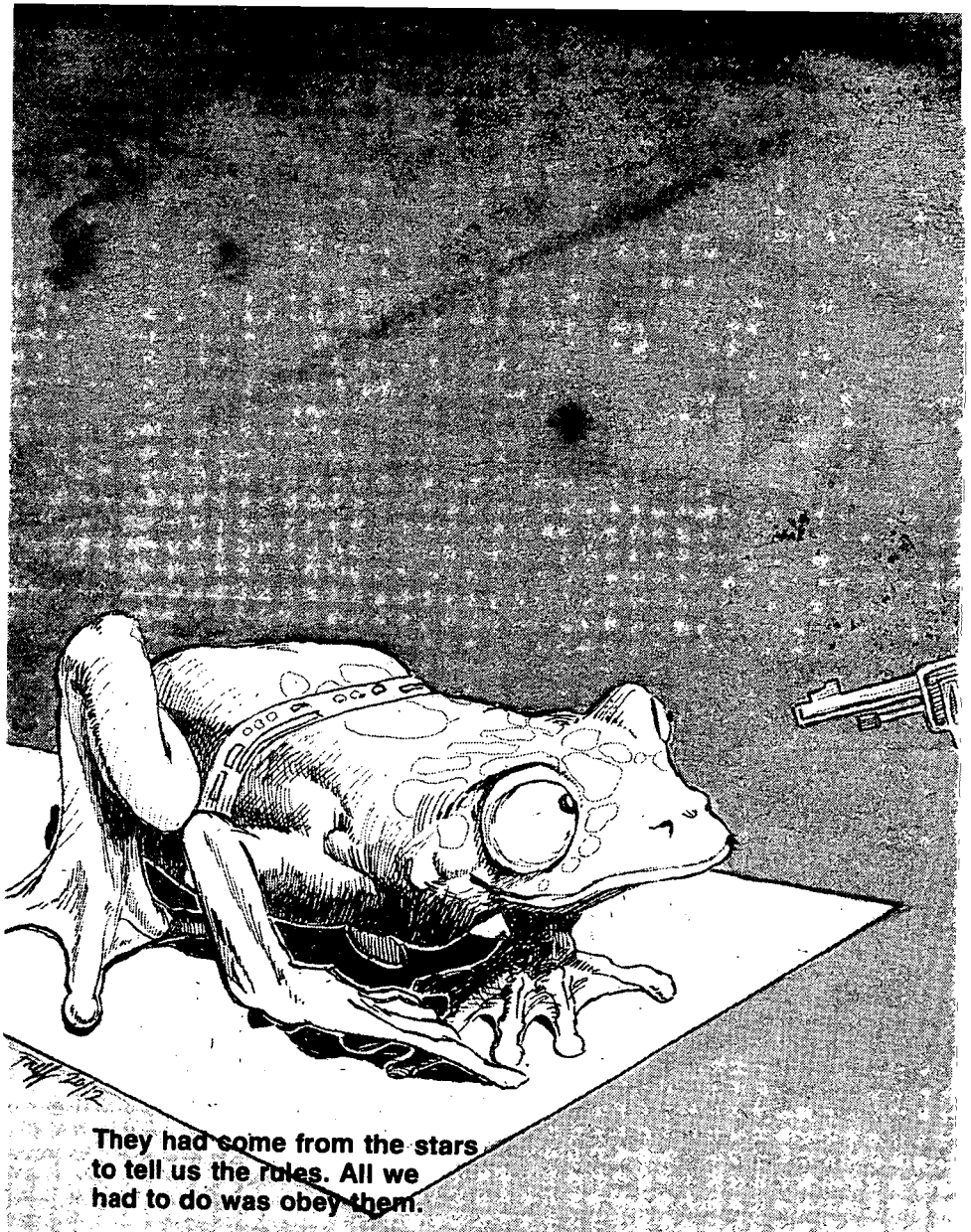

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Kevin O'Donnell

SHATTERED HOPES, BROKEN DREAMS

SOMETIMES, ON NIGHTS WHEN THE WIND has swept the clouds and the smog into someone else's sky, I look up at the haughty stars and wonder whether he was a terrified reactionary, afraid to live in a world with suddenly infinite horizons, or whether he was only a mad, desperate football fan. Not that it matters much.

* * *

The Perspe had come to the United Nations as spokesmen for a great galactic organization. And, humbling as it might be, our planet wasn't being invited to join, but was merely being informed of the rules of interstellar travel. Earth was being told, quite explicitly, that if it obeyed those laws its presence would be tolerated; otherwise it would find itself in a predicament.

The Perspe had one, specific purpose; they couldn't discuss more alluring matters: trade, cultural exchanges, and—most important of all—technology. They did say that after their mission had been completed, other races could conduct bilateral talks with us. That was enough to make the U.N. diplomats work like dogs to understand the laws of the interstellar sea, and to codify them in ways that would be clear to all the peoples of the world.

Eventually that brought me into it. During the initial exchanges, the translation devices of the Perspe had been a boon—but as negotiations grew more subtle, they could no longer convey nuances adequately. The finer the shade of meaning, the

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less likely it was that it could be made clear to the other party. They also had difficulty choosing the most appropriate of conflicting definitions. Several times talks had been totally sidetracked when the computers had picked the wrong word.

The Perspe kept a tight rein on their tempers even when we seemed to be insulting them.

Nevertheless, the talks had almost collapsed during a discussion of salvage rights. The American Ambassador's, "Does the finder of a derelict take possession?", had become, "Does one who encounters a broken-down alcoholic have the right to enslave him?" After giving their equivalent of a sigh, the Perspe declared that it was time for flesh and blood interpreters. They then suspended negotiations while they trained some.

My application was in the mail fifteen minutes after I saw their ad. The salary and career opportunities were attractive but that wasn't the reason I almost wrecked my car getting to the Post Office. I wanted the job because . . . how can I make you, who are satisfied with this world and this life, understand why I'm not? I mean, it's okay, as far as it goes, but it's dull. I've always had an urge, a drive, to . . . to see a temple without first having seen it in an art book. Or to burn golden brown on a beach that doesn't grace a hotel brochure. Or to buy a trinket that catches my fancy, without worrying that it was made for the tourist trade.

Do you understand? I want to form an opinion of a new locale all on my own, without having my brain pushed and pulled and patted into place by two or three earlier generations of tourists. I want, if you'll forgive me, to be the very first human ever to have gone to . . . wherever I've gone. So I applied for the job.

A month later, a special delivery letter arrived, requesting that I come to New York for an interview with the Perspe. I took the next flight out.

I'm still not entirely sure why they chose me. It was probably my knack for languages. (I speak Russian, Chinese, Arabic, as well as my native English) combined with my four years of experience in teaching. Also, I suspect that the Perspe wanted some more-or-less normal adults to balance the other students: three linguists who were going to make a systematic study of Perspean, and three children, who'd been selected because youngsters pick up languages rapidly and are relatively free of cultural bias. We were definitely a mixed bag.

* * *

The Perspe, short and squat, bear a distracting resemblance to oversized bullfrogs. Their skin is green, their hands and feet are webbed, and their great pop-eyes are

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mounted high on flattened heads. And they eat bugs.

The Perspe who interviewed me apologized for that at the outset. As I eased into the steel-framed leather chair, the speaker on his desk put his guttural rumble into English: "Please forgive me, Mr. Schelly, but the insects of your world are delicious. Please do not feel you are being insulted if I snatch a small snack now and again—rather, it is a compliment. This is the first world on which I have found palatable insect life."

Since the computer had said nothing about the manner in which the Perspe would catch insects, I was unprepared. I'd sort of expected him to grab at a fly with his hand, or swat one with a folded newspaper, or something along those lines. But a minute later, I heard a buzzing in the air above my left ear; the Perspe's wide mouth parted and I saw a flash of pink. My ears registered a tiny pop and the Perspe's mouth closed. "Delicious," crackled the speaker.

The verbal part of the interview was routine. The Perspe asked the usual questions, got the usual answers, and seemed to be as satisfied. The only difference was that I had a sense of being . . . tasted, I guess.

I don't know how to describe it, Imagine being licked, stared at, smelled, listened to, and stroked, all at the same time. Imagine further that the other person isn't doing it for sensual pleasure, but because he wants to find out *exactly* what you're like. Not approval, not disapproval, simply examination. It's unsettling.

Not that the Perspe stirred from his side of the spacious mahogany desk. It wasn't a physical inspection, even though it seemed like one. It was . . . well, it was my impression that he was straining his every sensory input to learn all he could about me.

Also, his effort to receive the data my body emitted seemed somehow not entirely passive, but more like radar or sonar than like "normal" senses.

The Perspe are nearly telepathic. They can't read thoughts, but they are very high-grade empaths; my interviewer couldn't tell what I was thinking, but he could tell what I was feeling—and on that basis he could guess at my thoughts. Not very accurately, at first, but as time went on he got better. Much better.

That's why the Perspe represent the other space-travelling races of the galaxy. Their talent helps them understand the species they're dealing with. Being able to judge just how much your opposite number wants something can be an advantage . . . The catch, of course, is that they have to learn each culture's non-verbal language; while being able to sense our emotions was a potential leg up, it was no more than a nuisance until they could correctly interpret a very con-

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fusing welter of impressions.

Part of my job was to teach one Perspe how to do that. On paper, it doesn't sound like much, but it infused me with exuberant excitement. That excitement impelled me, supported me, kept me happy even during the early part when it was mostly just hard work.

I'd get up around seven, shower, shave, and grab something to eat, and then start in on the tapes. For two or three hours I'd parrot pattern-sentences, as I tried to hammer them in—I was training myself to spit back Perspean responses automatically, rather than having to assemble them word-by-word in my conscious mind.

Then, at about ten in the morning, the Perspe to whom I'd been assigned would enter my room to do the emotion drill. After plopping into his chair, he would slowly recite a list of emotions. "Love," he'd say, and I'd try to feel love for someone or something. "Anger," he'd order, and I'd cross to the window, breathe deeply, and despise all those who would pollute our air. "Boredom," he'd call, and I'd look at him and laugh, because during those days, that was the one emotion I could not feel.

In the afternoons, we'd mix the two languages up every which way. I'd speak in English and he'd answer in Perspean; after an hour we'd switch and do it the other way. Sometimes we'd stick to one language for a while, then switch to bi-lingual. Every day I learned more; every day I came closer to fluency. He was a good teacher.

I haven't told you much about Rsark—that's "my" Perspean's name—because I don't know how to make you understand him. I don't really myself. A being's mind is a microcosm of his culture, right? Rsark's culture is so different from ours that to him the Polynesian and the Prussian seem one and the same.

If I told you that Rsark was a spend-thrift cannibal who'd had a thousand females once but none twice, you wouldn't think much of him, would you? But once you realized that his world doesn't use money, that the cannibalism is a religious obligation believed to confer immortality on the eaten and that it's physically dangerous for males of his race to have sex with the same female twice, your opinion might change. But possibly not, because you have been taught that certain beliefs are universal and absolute—that they hold true for off-world frogs, too.

So instead of trying to describe Rsark, let me tell you what happened the night the bellboy went crazy.

We were nearing the end of the language-learning phase and we were both feeling confident in our command of the other's language. Since we were in the midst of an involved conversation utilizing a high degree of empathic projection

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we decided to have dinner sent up to my room.

Rsark was slouched in his chair, trying to sort out the component parts of my broadcast. His eyes were shut because it was easier to feel my vibrations when there was no interference from a different type of sensory input. "Not bad, Robert," he commented. "But can you amplify the fear a little?

"The problem with you," he mused, "is that you're not single-minded enough; you're too introspective. You keep watching yourself behave, which adds an extra dimension of emotion. And once you start watching yourself watch yourself . . ." His tongue flickered out as a mosquito hummed through the screenless window. "Give me a less self-conscious fear, Robert."

"I'll try," I agreed, getting to my feet to answer a knock at the door. As I walked over to the foyer I tried to cut out all emotions but fear. Once I'd swung the door open, I didn't have to try any longer. At the other end of the room-service pushcart was a little man with wild eyes, a two-day beard and a pistol.

"Beautiful purity, Robert," called Rsark from around the corner. "That's excellent, thank you. You can stop now."

I opened my mouth to say something, but the gun moved forward and to the left. It wanted me to back into the sitting room. Slowly. I did.

"Robert," said Rsark petulantly, "I told you to stop. You're beginning to create a feedback effect."

The bellboy followed me in, using the cart like a lion-tamer uses his chair. His left hand groped for the door and pushed it shut. His fingers found the bolt. It grated into place. At his gesture, I stepped backwards again, until I was stopped by the chair I had been sitting in.

Rsark had risen to bitch about my stubbornness. A glance at the bellboy and his gun did nothing to change his mind. "Robert," he demanded, reaching up to give my forearm a painful tweak, "enough fear! It's starting to hurt!"

"Sorry, Rsark," I muttered, "but I can't help it. You're now tasting genuine fear—can't you see this guy's got a gun?"

"Why, certainly," he replied, sounding puzzled. "But what does that have to do with what you're broadcasting?"

I was nonplussed. A crazy-looking bellboy was aiming an ugly gun at my soft belly and Rsark didn't see the relation between that and my fear. "Ah that's better, Robert," he commended me. "You've mixed in—don't tell me, I should know by now—ah, exasperation, right?"

I just looked at him.

"Oh, how subtle!" he purred. "You've dropped the fear, strengthened the exasperation, and stirred in . . . astonishment, is it?"

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Before I could find the appropriate words, the bellboy cut in. "Shaddup," he growled, menacing Rsart with the gun. "Just siddown inna chair and shaddup."

The Perspe stood his ground. "Why?" My skin stopped tingling, so I knew he'd switched his data-gathering organs to the intruder.

"I'm taking you two hostage," said the bellboy, surprised into explanation by Rsark's demeanor. "Buddy-boy—" a careless wave of the gun indicated me "—is gonna call the big boys, tell 'em I want a million bucks and a plane to Rio."

"But why should they give you that?" asked Rsark, with the innocent curiosity of one from a world where no crime had ever been committed for money.

" 'cause I got you two hostage," grunted the bellboy. His bloodshot eyes flicked from me to Rsark and back, very neatly keeping us pinned.

The Perspe's eyes closed, and his small body tensed. "Robert!" he cried, "this man is amazing. He's feeling more emotions at one time than you ever have! I sense fear, hunger, lust, confusion, hatred, repulsion . . . oh, what a collection! Thank you for bringing him, Robert."

"I didn't."

His eyelids opened like theater curtains. "You didn't?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"He himself. He's serious.

"About what?"

"The money, you fucking frog!" shouted the bellboy. I think we'd hurt his feelings by ignoring him. "Froggie, you siddown inna chair. Now!"

I threw in my two cents' worth with a desperate, "Please, Rsark."

"Oh." He gave what I'd learned was a Perspean shrug as he waddled back to his chair. "Robert, this is not a common means of gaining money, is it?"

"No," I answered as I moved to the telephone. "It isn't." Under the man's watchful eye, I dialed down to the switchboard.

"Is it . . . what's the word . . . legal?"

"Legal?" I laughed to prove my courage, but I didn't really see anything funny. "No, Rsark, it's not legal. Not at all."

"Well," he asked thoughtfully, "if it's not legal, why does he think he can get the money?"

"Operator, get me the Secretary General of the U.N. Okay, I'll wait—but it's *extremely* important." I looked back to Rsark, and suddenly understood what a ping-pong ball feels like. "He will get the money, because if he doesn't, he'll kill us both."

"Oh." After a moment's consideration, he said to the bellboy, "Sir, you'd best reconsider. My organization would resent my death." To me, he added, "My fellow Perspe really couldn't care less, but for some reason the Federation Government gets upset when we're

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killed in the line of duty. They say it's an insult."

"Shaddup!" The bellboy turned to me. "Get 'im yet?"

I shook my head and pressed the telephone to my ear.

"Robert," asked Rsark, flapping his hand to catch my attention, "do you think he really means it?"

"Yes, Rsark," I said as patiently as I could manage.

"Is that why you feel so much fear?"

"Yes, Rsark." It was getting harder to be patient.

"I wish I could understand you beings," he complained. "Worrying all the time about death is not healthy. It blocks your synapses, you know. And mine, too, when I have to listen to you—and you're both radiating so ferociously that I can't do anything else."

"Well, I am very sorry, Rsark," I said from between tightly-clenched teeth. "I would not be feeling fear if this—this—this madman weren't pointing his damn gun at my heart. I'd feel a lot better if it were tomorrow already, and this whole thing was over."

"You Terrans," he muttered with what I considered to be unjustifiable scorn. "If you weren't driving me crazy with your undisciplined vibrations, I'd let you stew in this, just to teach you a lesson."

"What?" I would have laughed if I hadn't been so damn scared. "Do you think you can get us out of this?"

He nodded. I think he also tried to say, "That's right," but it didn't come out too well—his tongue was stretched halfway across the floor, its tip burdened with the heavy hand-gun. I didn't mind his being unintelligible at all.

My jaw sagged almost to my chest. The bellboy's, I noticed, had done the same; we must have looked like twins until I recovered and hit him with the telephone receiver. It was metal, and luckily my wild swing connected with his right temple, and he went down like a felled tree. First I told the operator to forget the U.N. and to send the police up instead. Then I crossed the room and helped the maddening little diplomat untangle his tongue. My mistake. The first thing he said was, "So that's what pure relief feels like." Luckily for interstellar relations, the phone was back on the hook.

* * *

Talks were to recommence at 9:00 a.m. the next morning. Rsark had arranged it, because of the Diplomatic Corps' solicitousness that evening following the attack. He took their syncophantic concern in stride, responded graciously to their queries, and waited till they had left before asking me, "Why are they afraid?"

I looked up from the vocabulary list I was trying to memorize and scratched my head. "Are they

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afraid?'' I wasn't a diplomat; I couldn't guess at their emotions. They all wore masks. During the previous six months I'd found that diplomatic body language was usually misleading and as often as not false. I suppose I should have remembered that earlier in the evening; every U.N. delegate who'd called or visited had projected contrary feelings that I'd taken seriously. ''They sure didn't look that way to me.''

''But they *were* afraid,'' he insisted. ''Each and every one of them. Why?''

''Um,'' I stalled, sliding the vocabulary list onto the coffee table because I had an inkling that this might go longer than a round or two, ''were they afraid the whole time?''

The skin under his eyes wrinkled as he thought. On a Terran, it would have been a frown. ''No,'' he said slowly, ''no, the pattern was high initial fear, a wave of relief shortly after we started talking, and then a recurrence of the fear. The second time around, it grew steadily, until at the end it was almost as high as at the beginning.''

Without really thinking about it, I got out of my chair and walked to the door. There I began to mimic the majority of the ambassadors, as I tried to force myself to feel what they had. ''First fear, then relief, then growing fear again?''

''Yes.'' He stared at me curiously.

''Well . . . hey, what did their fear feel like?'' I was exasperated with myself. There I was, discussing the cause of an emotion with one of the best emotion-readers in our part of the universe, and I hadn't thought to have him describe the fear. ''Did it feel like mine, when that maniac pulled his gun on us?''

''No,'' he said, shaking his head. ''It didn't. Similar, but not the same. Theirs felt like . . . let me put it like this. You were afraid of losing your life. That set up a certain hollow resonance, which I can easily recognize, now. But these men, while they resonated hollowly, did it in a slightly different way. They were afraid of losing *something*, but I don't know . . .''

I snapped my fingers. ''Their careers!''

He looked a question at me.

''When they came in, they were afraid they'd find you angry enough to go home. That would make their governments super-pissed; they'd be in hot water, maybe even get fired, demoted—I don't know. Then when they saw how unconcerned you were they were relieved. Later . . . oh, yeah—later they started thinking maybe you were going to get your revenge in some sneaky way—that's the way *they* do things, how do they know you're different? And the more they thought about it, the more scared they got.''

Rsark's head was bobbing up and down; my explanation must have

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made sense to him. "You Terrans value your careers almost as much as your lives, don't you?"

"Yeah," I agreed. Then I thought of all the suicides the world has known. "Sometimes more."

Rsark looked surprised. From what he'd told me, I knew that a Perspe chooses a career much as we choose hobbies. To them, jobs are diversions, not occupations.

"Rsark," I asked suddenly, "you can sense our emotions—but can you really share them? I mean, do you really *know* how horrible a Terran can feel when he loses his job?"

He studied the webbing between the fingers of his right hand. "On our world, Robert, the most important thing is knowledge. Or truth, if you prefer that word. Many of us devote our time to research, so that we can add to the knowledge of our race. The prestige attached to this spurs us on. And sometimes, in a . . . a rash desire to accumulate a lot of prestige quickly, someone . . ." his eyes turned to the open window, avoiding mine ". . . someone will offer a—what's your term?—' 'hypothesis' as fact. From the moment he does that, he knows fear. Because one of two things will happen: the hypothesis may be verified, in which case he will be honored, or it may prove to be false, in which case he will be . . . ridiculed." He fell silent for so long that I thought he'd finished, but just as I opened my mouth, he went on: "I think, Robert, that I can interpret into my own frame of reference your fear of losing your job." He said it so softly, so gently, that I couldn't probe. I picked up the vocabulary list, and went back to work.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, Rsark shook himself out of the mood that had enveloped him. Crossing the room to the telephone, he put a call through to his Chief of Mission. He was urging the Chief to start up negotiations again, even if they were futile; just to show us that there were no hard feelings.

"Look, Rsark," I said as I followed him into the back seat of the Cadillac limousine, "I don't think I can interpret for you yet. I'm not ready, I'm not fluent enough yet."

He didn't seem to hear me. I tapped his arm and started to repeat myself, but he waved an impatient hand. I shut up. "Robert," he said, "the guard in our hallway, the one by the elevator—why was he afraid?"

I frowned. Going to the coffee shop for a quick breakfast, I'd noticed the guard's near-servility, but I hadn't recognized it as a cloak for fear. I'd assumed that he'd gotten orders to treat us extra-nicely, to make up for the night before. "What kind of fear?"

"The same as the ambassadors felt last night."

"Oh, Jesus." I sank into the upholstery and laughed. "Rsark, you're incredible, you know? Here

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you can sniff out fear at twenty paces, but you can't figure out why it exists."

"Terran psychology is frustrating," he grumped. "And I've only been here nine months. You can't expect me to—"

"That's okay," I said, patting his leathery shoulder in mock condolence. "I know we don't make sense to you. But listen—remember why the ambassadors were scared?"

"Sure."

"Can't you see that he's afraid for the same reason?"

"But it wasn't his fault that the bellboy went crazy!"

"Of course not, but it was his fault that a nut with a gun got into our room, right?"

"I suppose that to your race," he sighed, "it might seem so."

"It is."

His solemn eyes blinked twice. Finally, he muttered, "I will talk to his superior. I don't want him punished." After that, he lapsed into uncommunicativeness.

* * *

Actually the day wasn't difficult. The eighteen of us filled one side of a long table, in a Perspe/student, Perspe/student arrangement. Opposite us, the U.N. negotiating team sat tense and wary. Separating the two sides was a portable computer, which did the bulk of the translation.

Our role was simple, especially since the U.N. had dispensed with simultaneous interpretation to help us. We'd listen to a speech in Perspean, then compare our understanding of it with the computer's English version. If we thought it had erred, we broke in.

To someone who speaks only one language, that may seem impossible, after only six months of study. It's not, really. We weren't translating from our native languages into Perspean; we were merely checking the accuracy of the translation from Perspean into English. Anyone who has learned a foreign language comprehends far more than he speaks. Even people who speak only one language understand a tremendous number of words that they themselves not only do not use, but cannot use. Encountering a word in its proper context makes an amazing difference.

I didn't get a chance to do much the first day. One of the Eastern bloc linguists scored first, when the computer tried to translate "Revolutionary" as "rebel". Later, one of the children—the scary little genius from Vienna, if I remember correctly—convinced us that *Tsoklo ga h'malk* was a Perspean idiom meaning "intimates of the deceased" and not "necrophiliacs".

"We couldn't understand your revulsion at giving priority passage to *Tsoklo ga h'malk*," whispered Rsark, behind the fan he'd made of his right hand. "What the hell's that 'necro-' word mean, anyway?"

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"Later, Rsark," I mumbled back.

The Perspe did the same thing, but from the opposite direction. This created a problem. As it turned out, each of us had accustomed "his" Perspe to the colloquial form of his language. Evidently, Perspean had no formal/informal dichotomy, as Terran languages do, so the Perspe had assumed that our daily language would be utilized in the negotiations. Their consternation when the first delegate let loose with full-blown diplomatese was something to behold . . . also somewhat of an embarrassment.

"But I can't understand him," protested Rsark in a low aside.

"I don't follow him too well myself," I admitted.

"But this is ridiculous!"

So I was pushed onto center stage, for a moment or two, at least. "Mr. Ambassador," I said as I cleared my throat, "please pardon my interruption, but there's a communication problem." He flushed with indignation.

The other Perspe, having heard my remarks put into their tongue by the computer, and having seen Rsark's reassuring nod verify the translation, rumbled general agreement. The delegates were upset. They resisted my suggestion that they skip the formalities. "Mr. Schelly," explained one, "diplomatic language is extremely precise. It may sound overly formal to you, but I assure you, sir a definite meaning is attached to each and every word. We speak the way we do to avoid possible misunderstandings. Yet you want us to abandon this precision?"

"Well, yeah," I said, squirming under his hostile gaze. "See, Rsark speaks English, and so does, uh—" one of the Perspe obligingly waved a pencil at me "—Tnad over there, but they don't speak your kind. They *can't* speak your kind. It would have taken too much time to learn. So, if you all could just sort of drop back into colloquial. . . ?"

Finally, the diplomats consented. They had no other choice. Either they spoke in ways familiar to the Perspe, or the talks were delayed again. "But," argued one last-ditch defender of formality, "this way will take so much longer! We'll have to define the implications and connotations of every word in the final draft!"

"It's still quicker," I pointed out, "than waiting for Rsark to learn your brand of English." He was displeased at my impertinence, but he subsided into inaudible grumblings peppered with dire looks.

The rest of the conference—that is, until the final draft of the treaty between Earth and the galactic organization had been drawn up—went fairly well, although it was a little dull.

Once everyone understood everyone else, it took less than a month to get the rules of interstellar

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travel into language all Terrans could understand. It might have taken longer if our representatives could have had an option other than simple acceptance, resembling a bargaining chip, they were forced to agree to everything. On the last day, everyone initialed twenty or thirty copies of the draft, and left New York to get it ratified by his government.

* * *

"Robert," said Rsark, on the day after the General Assembly had approved the treaty, "since there's nothing left for me to do officially, I'd like to become a tourist. I've seen nothing but this city. Would it be possible to—"

"Sure!" I was getting sick of New York, too. Too damn big, too impersonal. Unlike most Midwesterners in Fun City, I hadn't worried about getting mugged—one of the nicer aspects of a full-time security guard—but I was fed up with concrete, steel, and tinted glass. "Where do you want to go first?"

"It's your world, Robert."

"Well . . . do you want to see natural beauty, or human artifacts? Do you crave solitude or crowds? What do you want?"

He leaned back in his chair and thought for a while. After snacking on a wandering bee, he suggested, "Could we study this society? I'd like to observe how your countrymen . . . oh, how they work, how they live, how they amuse themselves. That sort of thing."

"No sooner said than done," I beamed. That was my chance. Because of the language training and the negotiations I hadn't seen a single Browns' game that season—and my home-town team had gotten to the play-offs; the Conference Champsionship with San Diego was scheduled for the following Sunday, in Cleveland's Memorial Stadium. "How'd you like to go to a football game?"

"Football?" He frowned briefly, and my heart sank.

"Yeah—you know, that game I was watching on television last week?"

"Oh, that!" he said with startling enthusiasm. "That was very interesting. Yes, I'd like to see it. Tnad would, too."

The telephone leaped into my hand. In less than a minute I had begged an old high school friend, a sportswriter for the *Cleveland Press*, for tickets to the game. The phone was well away from my ear while he expostulated. I sipped at a cup of coffee until he ran out of steam. "Needless to say, Harry," I added in my best diplomatic manner, "we'll give you an exclusive interview after the game. Won't your readers be interested in the reactions of the first extraterrestrials ever to attend an NFL game?" I waited for ten seconds of dead air to slide by. "Thanks, Harry. I'll drop by your house on Sunday

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morning to pick up the tickets. I'll even pay you for them." Chuckling, I returned the receiver to its cradle. "Well, Rsark, looks like you and Tnad are going to make history."

* * *

A December day in Cleveland is rarely Mother Nature's finest moment, but on this occasion she relented, bestowing a blue sky and a light lake breeze on more than 86,000 fans. The temperature was in the mid-thirties, but snug inside my heavy coat and with the sun on my face, I was warm, comfortable and very happy.

The stadium was so crowded that we could barely move, which is saying a lot for a place with about 83,00 seats. After we'd found ours, I unpacked my binoculars and scanned our general vicinity. "Good," I commented to Rsark, "not many Charger fans."

"Huh?"

"Most of the people here," I explained patiently, "are from Cleveland. They want the Browns to win today, so they're called Brown fans. Those who want San Diego to win are called Charger fans. See, there's one over there." I was about to hand him the binoculars when I realized that they would never fit his eyes. "Well, down there, where that pennant is. It says San Diego on it."

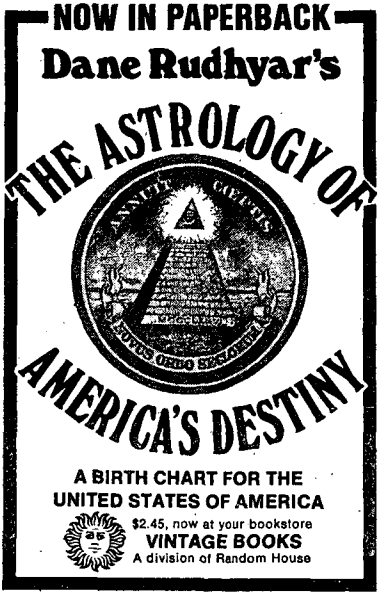
"I see it. It looks very lonely, all by itself. Why did they come, when everyone else wants the Browns to win?"

I shrugged; I myself have never understood that kind of support. "I guess they really want to watch the game, so they came even though they knew they'd be outnumbered 1000 to one. I'll bet they don't cheer very loudly, though."

"Not likely," Rsark agreed.

Then some little kids approached us, stopping about five feet from the Perspean. Rsark motioned the guard not to chase them away. With eyes almost as big and round as his they stared for what seemed like fifteen minutes. Finally the smallest of them walked right up to him.

"Hey, mister," he asked in an



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awestruck tone, "you one of them Per-spee?"

"Perspe," corrected Rsark gently. The kid was drawn tight as a piano wire; the alien diplomat tried to relax him. "Yes, I am."

"Ain't you cold?" The little boy stamped his feet, as if to show Rsark how to warm himself.

"No," he replied seriously, still trying to quiet the kid's nerves. "I'm wearing a space-suit, and that keeps me warm."

I hadn't thought the wide-stretched brown eyes could get bigger, but they did. "Really?"

"Uh-huh." He tapped the silver belt that encircled his waist. "See? This controls it."

The boy's interest was finally caught. His fear vanished; "I don't see no space-suit!"

"That's because it's almost invisible. It's a force field, and it can't be seen against my skin. But wait a minute." He held his hand up in the air and spread his fingers. "Look at it against the sky. See around the edges?" A minute flicker of light outlined each of his fingers. "That's the force field right there."

"And it really keeps you warm, huh?"

"That it does."

"Hey, Willie," one of his friends hissed, "the teams're comin' out now. Let's go!" There was no doubt in his mind, at least, as to the relative importance of alien diplomats and the Cleveland Browns. With perfunctory waves the little pack disappeared into the crowd.

"Nice boy," said Rsark as he leaned back in his seat.

"Pretty brave, too," I suggested, "to come right up and talk to you that way."

"Well," he shrugged, "if he'd gone up to ugly old Tnad over there, then I'd agree with you. But—" he modestly cast his eyes down "—I'm so much handsomer than he is that I don't frighten little children."

The other diplomat pretended not to have heard, and since the teams were lining up for the kick-off, I decided that I would, too. "The team on the right is Cleveland, the one on the left is San Diego. The Chargers will start the game by kicking to the Browns."

"Why?"

"Uh, a few minutes ago, they flipped a coin to see who'd receive first." I saw Rsark had drawn a blank. "Random chance determines who will kick." He nodded. The whistle blew and the game was on.

* * *

If it had happened in the second half, or even late in the first, it wouldn't have mattered; we would have left by then.

After the kick-off, we didn't try to say anything further. It was too noisy; 86,000 cheering people can drown out a lot of conversation—and the Browns were giving the crowd cause to shout.

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The quarterback, a second-year man out of Oklahoma, had led the Browns to a 12-1-1 season. He had a healthy body, an arm powerful enough to rifle the ball sixty yards, a computer brain, and the ability to inspire a team.

That last was Jack Smeriglio's most important asset. When he was on the field, the Browns were a devastating machine, uncontrollable and invulnerable. When he went off something happened to the other parts of the machine. It was as if they climbed down from a dream, awoke to the realization that they had been playing way over their heads . . . When Smeriglio went to the bench, he left behind eleven individuals, not a team.

But he was in, and the Browns were tearing up the Chargers. The first play from scrimmage lifted the spectators out of their seats. On first and ten at his own twenty, he audibled. Then his running-back took it on a draw and got eighteen twisting, clawing yards. First and ten on the thirty-eight. Another audible. The tight end cut across the forty-five and found the ball buried in his gut. He got six more yards before being dumped. First down on the Charger forty-nine. No audible. Heavy rush, but Smeriglio ducked out from under two angry behemoths and put a perfect spiral into the hands of his wide receiver, who hurtled out of bounds on the Charger eight-yard line.

"Robert," Rsark bellowed into my ear, "I am getting uneasy. There is too much emotion here; it is setting up feedback in me. I imagine Tnad is feeling the same thing. Can we leave?"

The crowd-noise was so deafening that I wasn't quite sure of what he'd said. Whipping out a notebook, I scribbled, "Can't hear you," on the first page. I handed it to him, and watched Smeriglio take his time getting downfield. He cut an impressive figure as he strode through the cheers that rocked the massive stadium.

Rsark wrote, then held the notebook before my eyes; I read his request and shrugged. I hated to leave, but in a situation like that I couldn't think of myself. "Okay," I wrote beneath his elegant script, "we'll leave after the next play."

He read it, and patted me on the knee to let me know that was ok. I circled the last line, and passed it down to Tnad. He shot me a grateful glance. Greg Cohen, Tnad's student/tutor didn't, but I could hardly blame him for that.

Then Smeriglio brought the team out of the huddle, looked around, and started to bark out his signals. The stadium was going crazy. Everywhere you looked, people were on their feet, waving their arms, shouting for all they were worth. Smeriglio started to call for silence. His hands rose to his shoulders, then he dropped forward to his knees. Obligingly, everyone hushed, except for the people in the

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left-end zone, the ones who were facing him. They kept on screaming.

In the relative silence, the second shot was shockingly loud. Smeriglio toppled to his face. When the center rolled him over, every person present could see the gaping hole the dum-dum bullets had left in his chest. For one or two heartbeats, the 86,000 people in Memorial Stadium were more silent than a snowy mountaintop. I heard only two sounds—a rising wind, and Tnad's moan.

"Quick," commanded Rsark, tugging at my sleeve, "you must get us out of here. The emotion, it's—"

"Greg!" I was on my feet with the Perspe curled in my arms. "Grab Tnad! Let's go!"

The crowds were impossible. Understandably so. I was operating at full speed, where each second dragged by like a minute. They were in normal time, and annoyed that we cut off their view of the field. Yet I went down twelve steps in three leaps; all the while balancing Rsark most carefully. "Get outa my way!" I shouted as I floated through the air, so agonizingly slowly that I had time to notice the squad of trainers rushing out to the fallen quarterback. "Emergency case here, move it, move it!"

I had just turned the corner when a rumble like an avalanche began. Ahead loomed the maze of runways, catwalks, and ramps that led to the outside. I poured it on, putting into the sprint every ounce of power my legs possessed. The concrete drifted beneath me like river water under a raft. Two more bounds. Cohen was close behind me; the security guards were lost in the crowd. The rumble broke into a full-throated roar of anger and frustration and hatred. Rsark responded with such a terrible noise that while I waited for my left foot to touch, I sent up a prayer to God, asking Him to quiet my friend. An instant later, after Rsark had gone quiet but frighteningly stiff, I re-worded the prayer. Then he was writhing in my arms, nearly fighting free of my grip, and a third plea rose to Heaven.

Then, far in the distance, high above all the other monstrous noises

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coming from the brilliantly-lighted stadium came a silvery shriek of agony that surely marked the end of someone's life. And my friend Rsark went limp. And died.

* * *

That's about all there was to it. I spoke to Rsark's superior and explained what had happened. He regretted the untimely loss of two of his assistants, but he was a Perspe. "Everyone must die," he comforted me, "and the manner of death is not important. What matters is whether one had been happy or not. Rsark and Tnad led lives full of joy. Long lives, with much joy. I am glad that they tasted pleasure so frequently."

But he was a Perspe. His bosses, the beings who run the galactic organization that had sent Rsark and his colleagues to Earth, were not. They looked at the matter from a completely different angle. "To them," the wistful Ambassador told the emergency session of the General Assembly, "Rsark and Tnad died at the hands of an angry mob. I told them that it was both accidental and extraordinary. They said that if you Terrans can keep your hands from hurling stones, you should be able to keep your minds from hurling hate. I regret to inform you that we must disavow the recently-signed treaty.

The remainder of the Perspe mission left the next morning. The

warships took up a tight orbit around Earth the following day. They're there now, blockading us, keeping us crawling on a planet that seems very cramped. No one knows when they'll consent to talk again. That's my new job. Every day, for eight hours, I sit at a microphone. In halting Perspean, I beg the beings to understand us, to talk to us, to . . . forgive us.

Sometimes, on nights when the wind has swept the clouds and the smog into someone else's sky, I look up at the haughty stars and wonder whether he was a terrified reactionary, afraid to let the world live with suddenly infinite horizons, or whether he was only a mad, desperate football fan. Not that it matters much. ★

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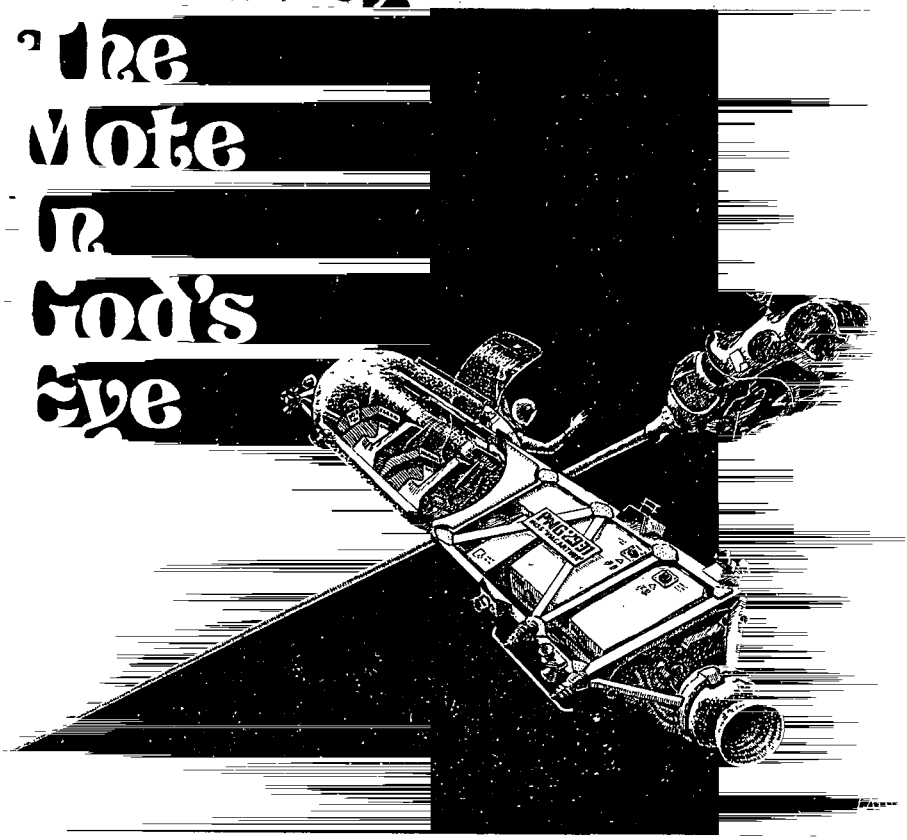
Building The Mote in God's Eye



Jerry Pournelle
and
Larry Niven

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A STEP FARTHER OUT

COLLABORATIONS ARE UNNATURAL. The writer is a jealous god. He builds his universe without interference. He resents the carping of mentally deficient critics and the editor's capricious demands for revisions. Let two writers try to make one universe, and their defenses get in the way.

But. Our fields of expertise matched each the other's blind spots, unnaturally well. There were books neither of us could write alone. We had to try it.

At first we were too polite, too reluctant to criticize each other's work. That may have saved us from killing each other early on, but it left flaws that had to be torn out of the book later.

We had to build the worlds. From Motie physiognomy we had to build Motie technology and history and life styles. Niven had to be coached in the basic history of Pournelle's thousand-year-old interstellar culture.

It took us three years. At the end we had a novel of 245,000 words . . .which was too long. We cut it to 170,000, to the reader's great benefit. We cut 20,000 words off the beginning, including in one lump our first couple of months of work: a Prologue, a battle between spacegoing warcraft, and a prison camp scene. All of the crucial information had to be embedded in later sections.

We give that Prologue here. When the Moties and the Empire and the star systems and their technologies and philosophies had become one interrelated whole, this is how it looked from New Caledonia system. We called it

MOTELIGHT

Last night at this time he had gone out to look at the stars. Instead a glare of white light like an exploding sun had met him at the door, and when he could see again a flaming mushroom

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was rising from the cornfields at the edge of the black hemisphere roofing the University. Then had come sound, rumbling, rolling across the fields to shake the house.

Alice had run out in terror, desperate to have her worst fears confirmed, crying, "What are you learning that's worth getting us all killed?"

He'd dismissed her question as typical of an astronomer's wife, but in fact he was learning nothing. The main telescope controls were erratic, and nothing could be done, for the telescope itself was on New Scotland's tiny moon. These nights interplanetary space rippled with the strange lights of war, and the atmosphere glowed with ionization from shock waves, beamed radiation, fusion explosions. . .He had gone back inside without answering.

Now, late in the evening of New Scotland's 27 hour day, Thaddeus Potter, Ph.D., strolled out into the night air.

It was a good night for seeing. Interplanetary war could play hell with the seeing; but tonight the bombardment from New Ireland had ceased. The Imperial Navy had won a victory.

Potter had paid no attention to the newscasts; still, he appreciated the victory's effects. Perhaps tonight the war wouldn't interfere with his work. He walked thirty paces forward and turned just where the roof of his house wouldn't block the Coal Sack. It was a sight he never tired of.

The Coal Sack was a nebular mass of gas and dust, small as such things go—eight to ten parsecs thick—but dense, and close enough to New Caledonia to block a quarter of the sky. Earth lay somewhere on the other side of it, and so did the Imperial Capital, Sparta, both forever invisible. The Coal Sack hid most of the Empire, but it made a fine velvet backdrop for two close, brilliant stars.

And one of them had changed drastically.

Potter's face changed too. His eyes bugged. His lantern jaw hung loose on its hinges. Stupidly he stared at the sky as if seeing it for the first time.

Then, abruptly, he ran into the house.

Alice came into the bedroom as he was phong Edwards. "What's happened?" she cried. "Have they pierced the shield?"

"No," Potter snapped over his shoulder. Then, grudgingly, "Something's happened to the Mote."

"Oh for God's sake!" She was genuinely angry, Potter saw. All that fuss about a star, with civilization falling around our ears! *But Alice had no love of the stars.*

Edwards answered. On the screen he showed naked from the waist up, his long curly hair a tangled bird's nest. "Who the hell–? Thad. I might have known. Thad, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes. Go outside," Potter ordered. "Have a look at the Mote."

"The Mote? The Mote?"

"Yes. It's gone nova!" Potter shouted. Edwards growled, then sudden comprehension struck. He left the screen without hanging up. Potter reached out to dial the bedroom window transparent. And it was still there.

Even without the Coal Sack for backdrop Murcheson's Eye would be the brightest object in the sky. At its rising the Coal Sack resembled the silhouette of a hooded man, head and shoulders; and the off-centered red supergiant became a watchful, malevolent eye. The University itself had be-

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gun as an observatory funded to study the supergiant.

This eye had a mote: a yellow dwarf companion, smaller and dimmer, and uninteresting. The Universe held plenty of yellow dwarfs.

But tonight the Mote was a brilliant blue-green point. It was almost as bright as Murcheson's Eye itself, and it burned with a purer light. Murcheson's Eye was white with a strong red tinge; but the Mote was bluegreen with no compromise, impossibly green.

Edwards came back to the phone. "Thad, that's no nova. It's like nothing ever recorded. Thad, we've got to get to the observatory!"

"I know. I'll meet you there."

"I want to do spectroscopy on it."

"All right."

"God, I hope the seeing holds! Do you think we'll be able to get through today?"

"If you hang up, we'll find out sooner."

"What? Och, aye." Edwards hung up.

* * *

The bombardment started as Potter was boarding his bike. There was a hot streak of light like a very large *shooting star; and it didn't burn out, but reached all the way to the horizon. Stratospheric clouds formed and vanished, outlining the shock wave. Light glared on the horizon, then faded gradually.*

"Damn," muttered Potter, with feeling. He started the motor. The war was no concern of his, except that he no longer had New Irish students. He even missed some of them. There was one chap from Cohane who. . .

A cluster of stars streaked down in exploding fireworks. Something burned like a new star overhead. The falling stars winked out, but the other light went on and on, changing colors rapidly, even while the shock wave clouds dissipated. Then the night became clear, and Potter saw that it was on the moon.

What could New Ireland be shooting at on New Scotland's moon?

Potter understood then. "You bastards!" he screamed at the sky. "You lousy traitor *bastards!"*

The single light reddened.

He stormed around the side of Edwards' house shouting, "The traitors bombed the main telescope! Did you see *it? All our work—oh."*

He had forgotten Edwards' backyard telescope.

It had cost him plenty, and it was very good, although it weighed only four kilograms. It was portable— "Especially," Edwards used to say, "when compared with the main telescope."

He had brought it because the fourth attempt at grinding his own mirror produced another cracked disk and an ultimatium from his now dead wife about Number 200 Carbo grains tracked onto her New-Life carpets. . .

Now Edwards moved away from the eyepiece saying, "Nothing much to see there." He was right. There were no features. Potter saw only a uniform aquamarine field.

"But have a look at this," said Edwards. "Move back a bit. . ." He set beneath the eyepiece a large sheet of white paper, then a wedge of clear quartz.

The prism spread a fan-shaped rainbow across the paper. But the rainbow was almost too dim to see, vanishing beside a single line of aquamarine; and that line blazed.

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"One line," said Potter. "Monochromatic?"

"I told you yon was no nova."

"Too right it wasn't. But what is it? Laser light? It has to be artificial! Lord, what a technology they've built!"

"Och, come now." Edwards interrupted the monologue. "I doubt yon's artificial at all. Too intense." His voice was cheerful. "We're seeing something new. Somehow yon Mote is generating coherent light."

"I don't believe it."

Edwards looked annoyed. After all, it was his *telescope. "What think you, then? Some booby calling for help? If they were that powerful, they would send a ship. A ship would come thirty-five years sooner!"*

"But there's no tramline from the Mote to New Caledonia! Not even theoretically possible. Only link to the Mote has to start inside the Eye. Murcheson looked for it, you know, but he never found it. The Mote's alone out there."

"Och, then how could there be a colony?" Edwards demanded in triumph. "Be reasonable, Thad! We hae a new natural phenomenon, something new in stellar proccess."

"But if someone is *calling—"*

"Let's hope not. We could no help them. We couldn't reach them, even if we knew the links! There's no starship in the New Cal system, and there's no likely to be until the war's over." Edwards looked up at the sky. The moon was a small, irregular half-disk; and a circular crater still burned red in the dark half.

A brilliant violent streak flamed high overhead. The violet light grew more intense and flared white, then vanished. A warship had died out there.

"Ah, well," Edwards said. His voice softened. "If someone's calling he picked a hell of a time for it. But at least we can search for modulations. If the beam is no modulated, you'll admit there's nobody there, will you not?"

"Of course," said Potter.

* * *

In 2862 there were no starships behind the Coal Sack. On the other side, around Crucis and the Capital, a tiny fleet still rode the force paths between stars to the worlds Sparta controlled. There were fewer loyal ships and worlds each year.

The summer of 2862 was lean for New Scotland. Day after day a few men crept outside the black dome that defended the city; but they always returned at night. Few saw the rising of the Coal Sack.

It climbed weirdly, its resemblance to a shrouded human silhouette marred by the festive two-colored eye. The Mote burned as brightly as Murcheson's Eye now. But who would listen to Potter and Edwards and their crazy tales about the Mote? The night sky was a battlefield, dangerous to look upon.

The war was not really fought for the Empire now. In the New Caledonia system the war continued because it would not end. Loyalist and Rebel were meaningless terms; but it hardly mattered while bombs and wrecked ships fell from the skies.

Henry Morrissey was still head of the University Astronomy Department. He tried to talk Potter and Edwards into returning to the protection of the Langston Field. His only success was that Potter sent his wife and two sons back with Morrissey. Edwards had no

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living dependents, and both refused to budge.

Morrissey was willing to believe that something had happened to the Mote, but not that it was visible to the naked eye. Potter was known for his monomaniacal enthusiasms.

The Department could supply them with equipment. It was makeshift, but it should have done the job. There was laser light coming from the Mote. It came with terrific force, and must have required terrific power, and enormous sophistication to build that power. No one would build such a thing except to send a message.

And there was no message. The beam was not modulated. It did not change color, or blink off and on, or change in intensity. It was a steady, beautifully pure, terribly intense beam of coherent light.

Potter watched to see if it might change silhouette, staring for hours into the telescope. Edwards was no help at all. He alternated between polite gloating at having proved his point, and impolite words muttered as he tried to investigate the new "stellar process" with inadequate equipment. The only thing they agreed on was the need to publish their observations, and the impossibility of doing so.

One night a missile exploded against the edge of the black dome. The Langston Field protecting University City could only absorb so much energy before radiating inward, vaporizing the town, and it took time to dissipate the hellish fury poured into it. Frantic engineers worked to radiate away the shield energy before the generators melted to slag.

They succeeded, but there was a burn-through: a generator left yellow-hot and runny. A relay snapped open, and New Caledonia stood undefended against a hostile sky. Before the Navy could restore the Field a million people had watched the rising of the Coal Sack.

"I came to apologize," Morrissey told Potter the next morning. "Something damned strange has *happened to the Mote. What have you got?"*

He listened to Potter and Edwards, and he stopped their fight. Now that they had an audience they almost came to blows. Morrissey promised them more equipment and retreated under the restored shield. He had been an astronomer in his time. Somehow he got them what they needed.

Weeks became months. The war continued, wearing New Scotland down, exhausting her resources. Potter and Edwards worked on, learning nothing, fighting with each other and screaming curses at the New Irish traitors.

They might as well have stayed under the shield. The Mote produced coherent light of amazing purity. Four months after it began the light jumped in intensity and stayed that way. Five months later it jumped again.

It jumped once more, four months later, but Potter and Edwards didn't see it. That was the night a ship from New Ireland fell from the sky, its shield blazing violet with friction. It was low when the shield overloaded and collapsed, releasing stored energy in one ferocious blast.

Gammas and photons washed across the plains beyond the city, and Potter and Edwards were carried into the University hospital by worried students. Potter died three days later. Edwards walked for the rest of his life with a backpack attached to his shoulders: a portable life support system.

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* * *

It was 2870 on every world where clocks still ran when the miracle came to New Scotland.

An interstellar trading ship, long converted for war and recently damaged, fell into the system with her Langston Field intact and her hold filled with torpedoes. She was killed in the final battle, but the insurrection on New Ireland died as well. Now all the New Caledonia system was loyal to the Empire; and the Empire no longer existed.

The University came out from under the shield. Some had forgotten that the Mote had once been a small yellow-white point. Most didn't care. There was a world to be tamed, and that world had been bare rock terraformed in the first place. The fragile imported biosphere was nearly destroyed, and it took all their ingenuity and work to keep New Scotland inhabitable.

They succeeded because they had to. There were no ships to take survivors anywhere else. The Yards had been destroyed in the war, and there would be no more interstellar craft. They were alone behind the Coal Sack.

The Mote continued to grow brighter as the years passed. Soon it was more brilliant than the Eye; but there were no astronomers on New Scotland to care. In 2891 the Coal Sack was a black silhouette of a hooded man. It had one terribly bright blue-green eye, with a red fleck in it.

* * *

One night at the rising of the Coal Sack, a farmer named Howard Grote Littlemead was struck with inspiration. It came to him that the Coal Sack was

God, and that he ought to tell someone.

Tradition had it that the Face of God could be seen from New Caledonia; and Littlemead had a powerful voice. Despite the opposition of the Imperial Orthodox Church, despite the protests of the Viceroy and the scorn of the University staff, the Church of Him spread until it was a power of New Scotland.

It was never large, but its members were fanatics; and they had the miracle of the Mote, which no scientist could explain. By 2895 the Church of

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Him was a power among New Scot farmers, but not in the cities. Still, half the population worked in the fields. The converter kitchens had all broken down.

By 2900 New Scotland had two working interplanetary spacecraft, one of which could not land. Its Langston Field had died. The term was appropriate. When a piece of Empire technology stopped working, it was dead. It could not be repaired. New Scotland was becoming primitive.

For forty years the Mote had grown. Children refused to believe that it had once been called the Mote. Adults knew it was true, but couldn't remember why. They called the twin stars Murcheson's Eye, and believed that the red supergiant had no special name.

The records might have showed differently, but the University records were suspect. The Libarary had been scrambled by electromagnetic pulses during the years of siege. It had large areas of amnesia.

In 2902 the Mote went out.

Its green light dimmed to nothing over a period of several hours; but that happened on the other side of the world. When the Coal Sack rose above University City that night, it rose as a blinded man.

All but a few remnants of the Church of Him died that year. With the aid of a handful of sleeping pills Howard Grote Littlemead hastened to meet his God. . .possibly to demand an explanation.

Astronomy also died. There were few enough astronomers and fewer tools; and when nobody could explain the vanishing of the Mote. . .and when telescopes turned on the Mote's remnant showed only a yellow dwarf star, with nothing remarkable about it at all. . .

People stopped considering the stars. They had a world to save.

The Mote was a G-2 yellow dwarf, thirty-five lightyears distant: a white point at the edge of Murcheson's Eye. So it was for more than a century, while the Second Empire rose from Sparta and came again to New Caledonia.

Then astronomers read old and incomplete records, and resumed their study of the red supergiant known as Murcheson's Eye; but they hardly noticed the Mote.

And the Mote did nothing unusual for one hundred and fifteen years.

* * *

Thirty-five light years away, the aliens of Mote Prime had launched a light-sail spacecraft, using batteries of laser cannon powerful enough to outshine a neighboring red supergiant.

As for why they did it that way, and why it looked like that, and what the bejeesus is going on. . .explanations follow.

* * *

MOST HARD SCIENCE FICTION writers follow standard rules for building worlds. We have formulae and tables for getting the orbits right, selecting suns of proper brightness, determining temperatures and climates, building a plausible ecology. Building worlds requires imagination, but a lot of the work is mechanical. Once the mechanical work is done the world may suggest a story, or it may even

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design its own inhabitants. Larry Niven's "known space" stories include worlds which have strongly affected their colonists.

Or the exceptions to the rules may form stories. Why does Mote Prime, a nominally Earthlike world, remind so many people of the planet Mars? What strangeness in its evolution made the atmosphere so helium-rich? This goes beyond mechanics.

In THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE (Simon and Schuster, 1974) we built not only worlds, but cultures.

From the start MOTE was to be a novel of first contact. After our initial story conference we had larger ambitions: MOTE would be, if we could write it, the *epitome* of first contact novels. We intended to explore every important problem arising from first contact with aliens—and to look at those problems from both human and alien viewpoints.

That meant creating cultures in far more detail than is needed for most novels. It's easy, when a novel is heavy with detail, for the details to get out of hand, creating glaring inconsistencies. (If civilization uses hydrogen fusion power at such a rate that world sea level has dropped by two feet, you will not have people sleeping in abandoned movie houses.) To avoid such inconsistencies we worked a great deal harder developing the basic technologies of both the Motie (alien) and the human civilizations.

In fact, when we finished the book we had nearly as much unpublished material as ended up in the book. There are many pages of data on Motie biology and evolutionary history; details on Empire science and technology; descriptions of space battles, how worlds are terraformed, how light-sails are constructed; and although these background details affected the novel and dictated what we would actually write, most of them never appear in the book.

We made several boundary decisions. One was to employ the Second Empire period of Pournelle's future history. That Empire existed as a series of sketches with a loose outline of its history, most of it previously published. MOTE had to be consistent with the published material.

Another parameter was the physical description of the aliens. Incredibly, that's all we began with: a detailed description of what became the prototype Motie, the Engineer: an attempt to build a nonsymmetrical alien, left over from a Niven story that never quite jelled. The history, biology, evolution, sociology, and culture of the Moties were extrapolated from that being's shape during endless coffee-and-brandy sessions.

That was our second forced choice. The Moties lived within the heart of the Empire, but had never been discovered. A simple explanation might have been to make the

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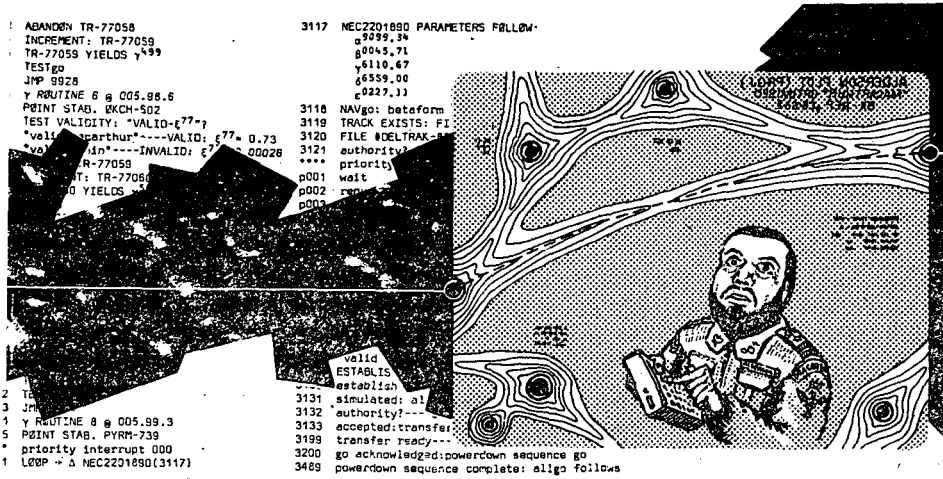

aliens a young civilization just discovering space travel, but that assumption contradicted Motie history as extrapolated from their appearance. We found another explanation in the nature of the Alderson drive, discussed later.

Because Mote has not yet appeared in paperback, many *Galaxy* readers will not have read it yet; and further discussion of the Moties would spoil the book for them.

Perhaps in a couple of years we'll do another article on the history and background of the Moties; Heaven knows we have enough data in our notebooks. On the other hand, we may just hang onto it for the sequels, if any. . .

EMPIRE TECHNOLOGY

The most important technological features of the Empire were previously published in other stories: the Alderson Drive and Langston Field.

Both were invented to Jerry Pournelle's specifications by Dan Alderson, a resident genius at Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratories. It had always been obvious that the Drive and Field would affect the cultures that used them, but until we got to work on MOTE it wasn't obvious just how profound the effects would be.

The Alderson Drive

Every sf writer eventually must face the problem of interstellar transportation. There are a number of approaches. One is to deny faster-than-light travel. This in practice forbids organized interstellar civilizations.

A second approach is to ignore General and Special Relativity. Readers usually won't accept this. It's a cop-out, and except in the kind of story that's more allegory than science fiction, it's not appropriate.

Another method is to retreat into

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doubletalk about hyperspace. Doubletalk drives are common enough. The problem is that when everything is permitted, nothing is forbidden. Good stories are made when there are difficulties to overcome, and if there are no limits to "hyperspace travel" there are no real limits to what the heroes and villains can do. In a single work the "difficulties" can be planned as the story goes along, and the drive then redesigned in rewrite; but we couldn't do that here.

Our method was to work out the Drive in detail and live with the resulting limitations. As it happens, the limits on the Drive influenced the final outcome of the story; but they were not invented for that purpose.

The Alderson Drive is consistent with everything presently known about physics. It merely assumes that additional discoveries will be made in about thirty years, at Cal Tech (as a tip o' the hat to Dan Alderson). The key event is the detection of a "fifth force".

There are four known forces in modern physics: two sub-nuclear forces responsible respectively for alpha and beta decay; electromagnetism, which includes light; and gravity. The Alderson force, then, is the fifth, and it is generated by thermonuclear reactions.

The force has little effect in our universe; in fact, it is barely detectable. Simultaneously with the discovery of the fifth force, however, we postulate the discovery of a second universe in point-to-point congruence with our own. The "continuum universe" differs from the one we're used to in that there are no known quantum effects there.

Within that universe particles may travel as fast as they can be accelerated; and the fifth force exists to accelerate them.

There's a lot more, including a page or so of differential equations, but that's the general idea.

You can get from one universe to another. For every construct in our universe there can be created a "correspondence particle" in the continuum universe. In order for your construct to go into and emerge from the continuum universe without change you must have some complex machinery to hold everything together and prevent your ship—and crew—from being disorganized into elementary particles.

Correspondence particles can be boosted to speeds faster than light: in fact, to speeds nearly infinite as we measure them. Of course they cannot emerge into our universe at such speeds: they have to lose their energy to emerge at all. More on that in a moment.

There are severe conditions to entering and leaving the continuum universe. To emerge from the continuum universe you must exit with precisely the same potential energy (measured in terms of the fifth force, not gravity) as you entered.

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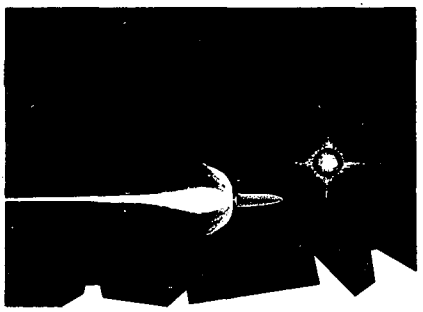
You must also have zero kinetic energy relative to a complex set of coordinates that we won't discuss here.

The fifth force is created by thermonuclear reactions: generally, that is, in stars. You may travel by using it, but only along precisely defined lines of equipotential flux: tramways or tramlines.

Imagine the universe as a thin rubber sheet, very flat. Now drop heavy rocks of different weights onto it. The rocks will distort the sheet, making little cone-shaped (more or less) dimples. Now put two rocks reasonably close together: the dimples will intersect in a valley. The intersection will have a "pass", a region higher than the low points where the rocks (stars) lie, but lower than the general level of the rubber sheet.

The route from one star to another through that "pass" is the tramline. Possible tramlines lie between each two stars, but they don't always exist, because when you add third and fourth stars to the system they may interfere, so there is no unique gradient line. If this seems confusing, don't spend a lot of time worrying about it; we'll get to the effects of all this in a moment.

You may also imagine stars to be like hills; move another star close and the hills will intersect. Again, from summit to summit there will be one and only one line that preserves the maximum potential energy for that level. Release a marble on



one hill and it will roll down, across the saddle, and up the side of the other. That too is a tramline effect. It's generally easier to think of the system as valleys rather than hills, because to travel from star to star you have to get over that "hump" between the two. The fifth force provides the energy for that.

You enter from the quantum universe. When you travel in the continuum universe you continually lose kinetic energy; it "leaks". This can be detected in our universe as photons. The effect can be important during a space battle. We cut such a space battle from MOTE, but it still exists, and we may yet publish it as a novella.

To get from the quantum to the continuum universe you must supply power, and this is available only in quantum terms. When you do this you turn yourself into a correspondence particle; go across the tramline; and come out at the point on the other side where your potential energy is equal to what you entered with, plus zero kinetic energy

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(in terms of the fifth force and complex reference axes).

For those bored by the last few paragraphs, take heart: we'll leave the technical details and get on with what it all means.

* * *

Travel by Alderson Drive consists of getting to the proper Alderson Point and turning on the Drive. Energy is used. You vanish, to reappear in an immeasurably short time at the Alderson Point in another star system some several light years away. If you haven't done everything right, or aren't at the Alderson Point, you turn on your drive and a lot of energy vanishes. You don't move. (In fact you do move, but you instantaneously reappear in the spot where you started.)

That's all there is to the Drive, but it dictates the structure of an interstellar civilization.

To begin with, the Drive works only from point to point across interstellar distances. Once in a star system you must rely on reaction drives to get around. There's no magic way from, say, Saturn to Earth: you've got to slog across.

Thus space battles are possible, and you can't escape battle by vanishing into hyperspace, as you could in future history series such as Beam Piper's and Gordon Dickson's. To reach a given planet you must travel across its stellar system, and you must enter that system at one of the Alderson Points. There won't be more than five or six possible points of entry, and there may only be one.

Star systems and planets can be thought of as continents and islands, then, and Alderson Points as narrow sea gates such as Suez, Gibraltar, Panama, Malay Straits, etc. To carry the analogy further, there's telegraph but no radio: the fastest message between star systems is one carried by a ship, but within star systems messages go much faster than the ships. . .

Hmm. This sounds a bit like the early days of steam. NOT sail; the ships require fuel and sophisticated repair facilities. They won't pull into some deserted star system and rebuild themselves unless they've carried the spare parts along. However, if you think of naval actions in the period between the Crimean War and World War One, you'll have a fair picture of conditions as implied by the Alderson Drive.

The Drive's limits mean that uninteresting stellar systems won't be explored. There are too many of them. They may be used as crossing-points if the stars are conveniently placed, but stars not along a travel route may never be visited.

Reaching the Mote, or leaving it, would be damned inconvenient. Its only tramline reaches to a star only a third of a light year away—Murcheson's Eye, the red supergiant—and ends deep inside

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the red-hot outer envelope. The aliens' only access to the Empire is across thirty-five light years of interstellar space—which no Empire ship would ever see. The gaps between the stars are as mysterious to the Empire as they are to you.

* * *

Langston Field

Our second key technological building block was the Langston Field, which absorbs and stores energy in proportion to the fourth power of incoming particle energy: that is, a slow-moving object can penetrate it, but the faster it's moving (or hotter it is) the more readily it is absorbed.

(In fact it's not a simple fourth-power equation; but *Galaxy* readers surely don't need third-order differential equations for amusement.)

The Field can be used for protection against lasers, thermonuclear weapons, and nearly anything else. It isn't a perfect defense, however. The natural shape of the Field is a solid. Thus it wants to collapse and vaporize everything inside it. It takes energy to maintain a hole inside the Field, and more energy to open a control in it so that you can cause it selectively to radiate away stored energy. You don't get something for nothing.

This means that if a Field is overloaded, the ship inside vanishes into vapor. In addition, *parts* of the Field can be momentarily overloaded: a sufficiently high energy impacting a small enough area will cause a temporary Field collapse, and a burst of energy penetrates to the inside. This can damage a ship without destroying it.

Cosmography

We've got to invent a term. What is a good word to mean the equivalent of "geography" as projected into interstellar space? True, planetologists have now adopted "geology" to mean geophysical sciences applied to any planet, not merely Earth; and one might reasonably expect "geography" to be applied to the study of physical features of other planets—but we're concerned here with the relationship of star systems to each other.

We suggest cosmography, but perhaps that's too broad? Should that term be used for relationships of *galaxies,* and mere star system patterns be studied as "astrography"? After all, "astrogator" is a widely used term meaning "navigator" for interstellar flight.

Some of the astrography of MOTE was given because it had been previously published. In particular, the New Caledonia system, and the red supergiant known as Murcheson's Eye, had already been worked out. There were also published references to the history of New Caledonia.

We needed a red supergiant in the Empire. There's only one logi-

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cal place for that, and previously published stories had placed one there: Murcheson's Eye, behind the Coal Sack. It *has* to be behind the Coal Sack: if there were a supergiant that close anywhere else, we'd see it now.

Since we had to use Murcheson's Eye, we had to use New Caledonia. Not that this was any great imposition: New Scotland and New Ireland are interesting places, terraformed planets, with interesting features and interesting cultures.

There was one problem, though: New Scotland is inhabited by New Scots, a people who have preserved their sub-culture for a long time and defend it proudly. Thus, since much of the action takes place on New Scotland, some of the characters, including at least one major character, *had* to be New Scot. For structural reasons we had only two choices: the First Officer or the Chief Engineer.

We chose the Chief Engineer, largely because in the contemporary world it is a fact that a vastly disproportionate number of ship's engineers are Scots, and that seemed a reasonable thing to project into the future.

Alas, some critics have resented that, and a few have accused us of stealing Mr. Sinclair from *Star Trek*. We didn't. Mr. Sinclair is what he is for perfectly sound astrographical reasons.

The astrography eventually dictated the title of the book. Since most of the action takes place very near the Coal Sack, we needed to know how the Coal Sack would look close up from the back side. Eventually we put swirls of interplanetary dust in it, and evolving proto-stars, and all manner of marvels; but those came after we got *very* close. The first problem was the Coal Sack seen from ten parsecs.

Larry Niven hit on the happy image of a hooded man, with the super-giant where one eye might be. The supergiant has a small companion, a yellow dwarf not very different from our Sun. If the supergiant is an eye—Murcheson's Eye—then the dwarf is, of course, a mote in that eye.

But if the Hooded Man is seen by backward and superstitious peoples as the Face of God. . .then the name for the Mote becomes inevitable. . .and once suggested, The "Mote In God's Eye" is a near irresistible title. (Although in fact Larry Niven did resist it, and wanted "The Mote In Murcheson's Eye" up to the moment when the publisher argued strongly for the present title. . .)

The Ships

Long ago we acquired a commercial model called "The Explorer Ship Lief Ericson," a plastic spaceship of intriguing design. It is shaped something like a flattened pint whiskey bottle with a long neck. The "Lief Ericson," alas,

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was killed by general lack of interest in spacecraft by model buyers; a ghost of it is still marketed in hideous glow-in-the-dark color as some kind of flying saucer.

It's often easier to take a detailed construct and work within its limits than it is to have too much flexibility. For fun we tried to make the Lief Ericson work as a model for an Empire naval vessel. The exercise proved instructive.

First, the model is of a *big* ship, and is of the wrong shape ever to be carried aboard another vessel. Second, it had fins, only useful for atmosphere flight: what purpose would be served in having atmosphere capabilities on a large ship?

This dictated the class of ship: it must be a cruiser or battlecruiser. Battleships and dreadnaughts wouldn't ever land, and would be cylindrical or spherical to reduce surface area. Our ship was too large to be a destroyer (an expendable ship almost never employed on missions except as part of a flotilla). Cruisers and battlecruisers can be sent on independent missions.

MacArthur, a General Class Battlecruiser, began to emerge. She can enter atmosphere, but rarely does so, except when long independent assignments force her to seek fuel on her own. She can do this in either of two ways: go to a supply source, or fly into the hydrogen-rich atmosphere of a gas giant and scoop. There were scoops on the model, as it happens.

She has a large pair of doors in her hull, and a spacious compartment inside: obviously a hangar deck for carrying auxiliary craft. Hangar deck is also the only large compartment in her, and therefore would be the normal place of assembly for the crew when she isn't under battle conditions.

The tower on the model looked useless, and was almost ignored, until it occurred to us that on long missions not under acceleration it would be useful to have a high-gravity area. The ship is a bit thin to have much gravity in the "neck" without spinning her far more rapidly than you'd like; but with the tower, the forward area gets normal gravity without excessive spin rates.

And on, and so forth. In the novel, *Lenin* was designed from scratch; and of course we did have to make some modifications in Lief Ericson before she could become INSS *MacArthur;* but it's surprising just how much detail you can work up through having to live with the limits of a model. . .

SOCIOLOGY

The Alderson Drive and the Langston Field determine what kinds of interstellar organizations will be possible. There will be alternatives, but they have to fit into the limits these technologies impose.

In THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE we chose Imperial Aristocracy as the main form of human govern-

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ment. We've been praised for this: Dick Brass in a *New York Post* review concludes that we couldn't have chosen anything else, and other critics have applauded us for showing what such a society might be like.

Fortunately there are no Sacred Cows in science fiction. Maybe we should have stuck to incest? Because other critics have been horrified! Do we, they ask, really *believe* in imperial government? and *monarchy?*

That depends on what they mean by "believe in". Do we think it's desirable? We don't have to say. Inevitable? Of course not. Do we think it's *possible?* Damn straight.

The political science in MOTE is taken from C. Northcote Parkinson's *Evolution of Political Thought*. Parkinson himself echoes Aristotle.

It is fashionable to view history as a linear progression: things get better, never worse, and of course we'll never go back to the bad old days of (for instance) personal government. Oddly enough, even critics who have complained about the aristocratic pyramid in MOTE—and thus rejected our Empire as absurd—have been heard to complain about "Imperial Presidency" in the USA. How many readers would bet long odds against John-John Kennedy becoming President within our lifetimes?

Any pretended "science" of history is the bunk. That's the problem with Marxism. Yet Marx wrote a reasonable economic view of history up to his time, and some of his principles may be valid.

Military history is another valid way to view the last several thousand years—but no one in his right mind would pretend that a history of battles and strategies is the whole of the human story. You may write history in terms of medical science, in terms of rats, lice, and plagues, in terms of agricultural development, in terms of strong leadership personalities, and each view will hold some truth.

There are many ways to view history, and Aristotle's cycles as brought up to date by Parkinson make one of the better ones. For those who don't accept that proposition, we urge you at least to read Parkinson before making up your minds and closing the door.

The human society in MOTE is colored by technology and historial evolution. In MOTE's future history the United States and the Soviet Union form an alliance and together dominate the world during the last decades of the 20th Century. The alliance doesn't end their rivalry, and doesn't make the rulers or people of either nation love their partners.

The CoDominium Alliance needs a military force. Military people need something or someone they can give loyalty; few men ever risked their lives for a "standard of living" and there's little that's more

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stupid than dying for one's standard of living—unless it's dying for someone else's standard of living.

Do the attitudes of contemporary police and soldiers lead us to suppose that "democracy" or "the people" inspire loyalty? The proposition is at least open to question. in the future that leads to MOTE, a Russian Admiral named Lermontov becomes leader of CoDominium forces, although he is not himself interested in founding a dynasty, he transfers the loyalty of the Fleet to leaders who are.

He brings with him the military people at a time of great crisis. Crises have often produced strong loyalties to single leaders: Churchill, Roosevelt, George Washington, John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Crisis, etc. (A year after Kennedy's death Senator Pastore could address a national convention and get standing ovations with the words "There stood John Kennedy, TEN FEET TALL!!!")

Thus develops the Empire.

Look at another trend: personal dictatorship. There are as many people ruled by tyrants as by "democracy" in 1975, and even in the democracies charges of tyranny are not lacking. Dictatorships may not be the wave of the future—but is it unreasonable to suppose they might be?

Dictatorship is often tried in times of severe crisis: energy crisis, population crisis, pollution crisis, agricultural crisis—surely we do not lack for crises? The trouble with dictatorship is that it generates a succession crisis when the old man bows out. Portugal seems to be going through such at this moment. Chile, Uganda, Brazil, name your own examples: anyone want to bet that some of these won't turn to a new Caudillo with relief?

How to avoid succession crisis? One traditional method is to turn Bonapartist: give the job to a relative or descendent of the dictator. He may not do the job very well, but after enough crises people are often uninterested in whether the land is governed well. They just want things *settled* so they can get on with everyday life.

Suppose the dictator's son does govern well? A new dynasty is founded, and the trappings of legitimacy are thrust onto the new royal family. To be sure, the title of "King" may be abandoned. Napoleon chose to be "Emperor of the French", Cromwell chose "Lord Protector", and we suppose the US will be ruled by Presidents for a long time—but the nature of the Presidency, and the way one gets the office, may change.

See, for example, Niven's use of "Secretary-General" in the tales of Svetz the time-traveller.

We had a choice in MOTE: to keep the titles as well as the structure of aristocratic empire, or abandon the titles and retain the structure only. We could have abolished "Emperor" in favor of "Presi-

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dent'', or ''Chairperson'', or ''Leader''; or ''Admiral'', or ''Posnitch''. The latter, by the way, is the name of a particularly important President honored for all time by having his name adopted as the title for Leader. . .

We might have employed titles other than Duke (originally meant ''leader'' anyway) and Count (Companion to the king) and Marquis (Count of the frontier marches). Perhaps we should have. But any titles used would have been *translations* of whatever was current in the time of the novel, and the traditional titles had the effect of letting the reader know quickly the approximate status and some of the duties of the characters.

There are hints all through MOTE that the structure of government is not a mere carbon copy of the British Empire or Rome or England in the time of William III. On the other hand there are similarities, which are forced onto the Empire by the technology we assumed.

Imperial government is not inevitable. It is possible.

The alternate proposition is that we of 1975 are so advanced that we will never go back to the bad old days. Yet we can show you essays ''proving'' exactly that proposition—and written thousands of years ago. There's a flurry of them every few centuries.

We aren't the first people to think we've ''gone beyond'' personal government, personal loyalties, and a state religion. Maybe we won't be the last.

Anyway, MOTE is supposed to be entertainment, not an essay on the influence of science on social organization. (You're getting *that* here.)

The Empire is what it is largely because of the Alderson Drive and Langston Field. Without the Drive an Empire could not form. Certainly an interstellar Empire would look very different if it had to depend on lightspeed messages to send directives and receive reports. Punitive expeditions would be nearly impossible, hideously expensive, and probably futile: you'd be punishing the grandchildren of a generation that seceded from the Empire, or even a planet that put down the traitors after the message went out.

Even a rescue expedition might never reach a colony in trouble. A coalition of bureaucrats could always collect the funds for such an expedition, sign papers certifying that the ships are on the way, and pocket the money. . .in sixty years someone might realize what had happened, or not.

The Langston Field is crucial to the Empire, too. The Navy can survive partial destruction and keep fighting. Ships carry black boxes—plug-in sets of spare parts—and large crews who have little to do unless half of them get killed. That's much like the navies of fifty years ago.

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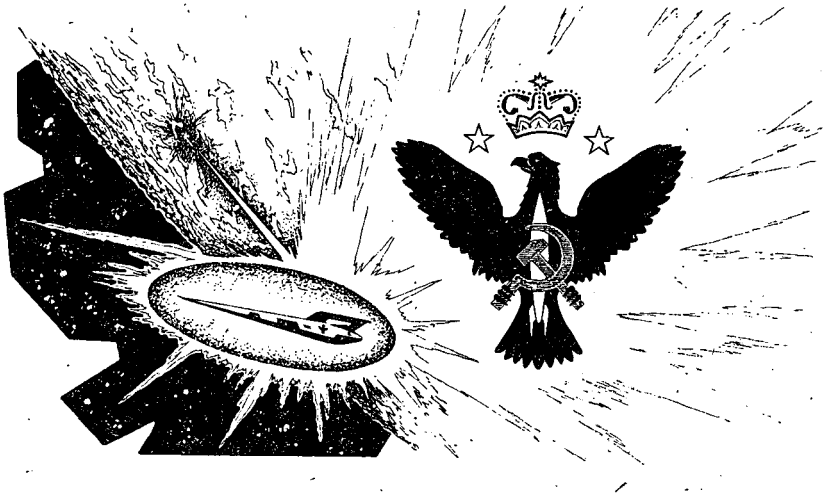

A merchant ship might have a crew of forty. A warship of similar size carries a crew ten times as large. Most have little to do for most of the life of the ship. It's only in battles that the large number of self-programming computers become important. *Then* the outcome of the battle may depend on having the largest and best-trained crew—and there aren't many prizes for second place in battle.

Big crews with little to do demand an organization geared to that kind of activity. Navies have been doing that for a long time, and have evolved a structure that they tenaciously hold onto.

Without the Field as defense against lasers and nuclear weapons, battles would become no more than offensive contests. They'd last microseconds, not hours. Ships would be destroyed or not, but hardly ever wounded. Crews would tend to be small, ships would be different, including something like the present-day aircraft carriers. Thus technology dictates Naval organization.

It dictates politics, too. If you can't get the populace, or a large part of it, under a city-sized Field, then any given planet lies naked to space.

If the Drive allowed ships to sneak up on planets, materializing without warning out of hyperspace, there could be no Empire even with the Field. There'd be no Empire because belonging to an Empire wouldn't protect you. Instead there might be populations of planet-

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bound serfs ruled at random by successive hordes of space pirates. Upward mobility in society would consist of getting your own ship and turning pirate.

Given Drive and Field, though, Empires are possible. What's more likely? A representative confederacy? It would hardly inspire the loyalty of the military forces, whatever else it might do. (In the War Between the States, the Confederacy's main problem was that the troops were loyal to their own State, not the central government.)

Each stellar system independent? That's reasonable, but is it stable? Surely there might be pressures toward unification of at least parts of interstellar space.

How has unification been achieved in the past? Nearly always by conquest or colonization or both. How have they been held together? Nearly always by loyalty to a leader, an Emperor, or a dynasty, generally buttressed by the trappings of religion and piety. Even Freethinkers of the last century weren't ashamed to profess loyalty to the Widow of Windsor. . .

Government over large areas needs emotional ties. It also needs *stability*. Government by 50%-plus-one hasn't enjoyed particularly stable politics—and it lasts only so long as the 50%-minus-one minority is willing to submit. Is heredity a rational way to choose leaders? It has this in its favor: the leader is known from an early age to be destined to rule, and can be educated to the job. Is that preferable to education based on how to *get* the job? Are elected officials better at governing, or at winning elections?

Well, at least the counter-case can be made. That's all we intended to do. We chose a stage of Empire in which the aristocracy was young and growing and dynamic, rather than static and decadent; when the aristocrats are more concerned with duty than with privilege; and we made no hint that we thought that stage would last forever.

RANDOM DETAILS

Robert Heinlein once wrote that the best way to give the flavor of the future is to drop in, without warning, some strange detail. He gives as an example, "The door dilated."

We have a number of such details in MOTE. We won't spoil the book by dragging them all out in a row. One of the most obvious we use is the personal computer, which not only does computations, but also puts the owner in contact with any near-by data bank; in effect it will give the answer to any question whose answer is known and that you think to ask.

Thus no idiot block gimmicks in MOTE. Our characters may fail to guess something, or not put information together in the right way, but they won't *forget* anything important. The closest that comes to happening is when Sally Fowler

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can't quite remember where she filed the tape of a conversation, and she doesn't take long to find it then.

On the other hand, people can be swamped with too much information, and that does happen.

There were many other details, all needed to keep the story moving. A rational kind of space suit, certainly different from the clumsy things used now. Personal weapons. The crystal used in a banquet aboard MacArthur: crystal strong as steel, cut from the windshield of a wrecked First Empire reentry vehicle, indicating the higher technology lost in that particular war. Clothing and fashion; the status of women; myriads of details of everyday life.

Not that *all* of these differ from the present. Some of the things we kept the same probably will change in a thousand years. Others. . .well, the customs associated with wines and hard liquors are old and stable. If we'd changed everything, and made an attempt to portray every detail of our thousand-year-advanced future, the story would have gotten bogged down in details.

* * *

MOTE is probably the only novel ever to have a planet's orbit changed to save a line.

New Chicago, as it appeared in the opening scenes of the first draft of MOTE, was a cold place, orbiting far from its star. It was never a very important point, and Larry Niven didn't even notice it.

Thus when he introduced Lady Sandra Liddell Leonovna Bright Fowler, he used as viewpoint character a Marine guard sweating in hot sunlight. The Marine thinks, "She doesn't sweat. She was carved from ice by the finest sculptor that ever lived."

Now that's a good line. Unfortunately it implies a hot planet. If the line must be kept, the planet must be moved.

So Jerry Pournelle moved it. New Chicago became a world much closer to a cooler sun. Its year changed, its climate changed, its whole history had to be changed. . .

Worth it, though. Sometimes it's easier to build new worlds than think up good lines. . . ★

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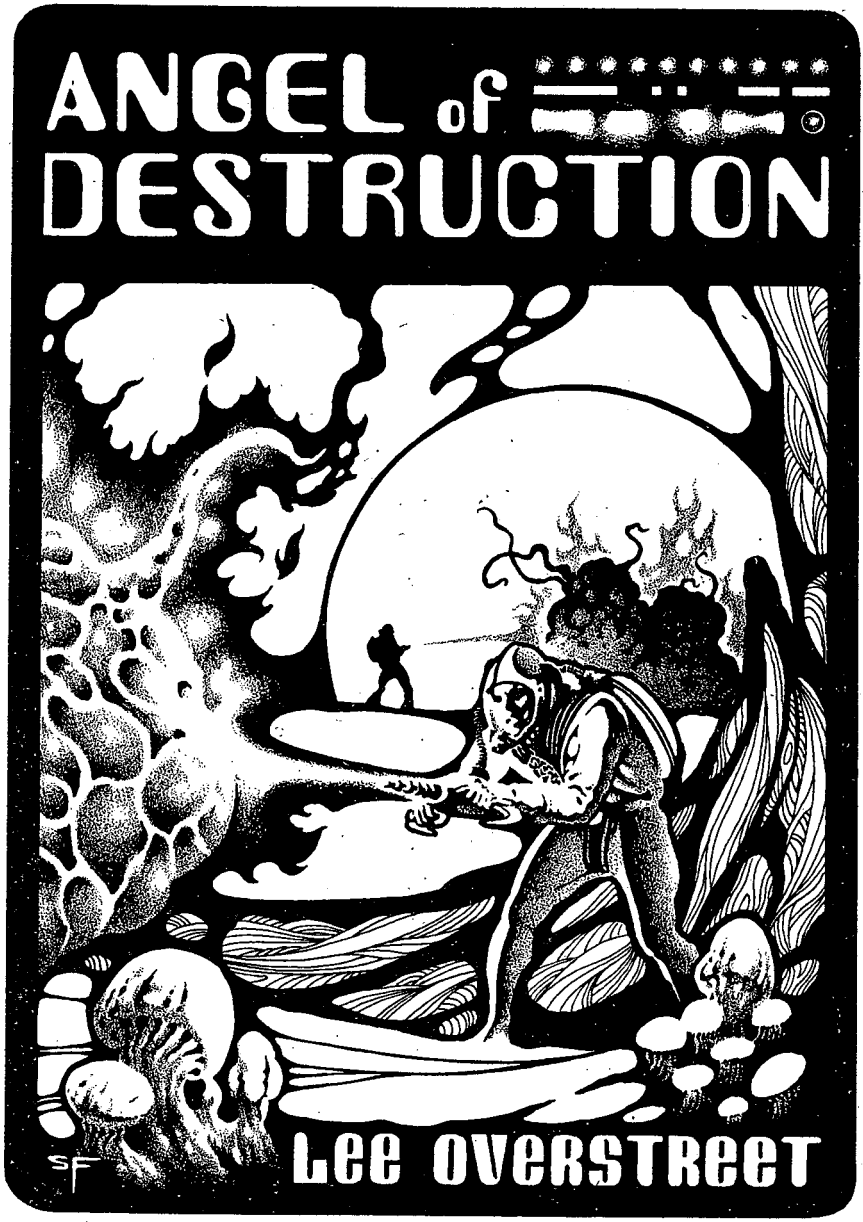

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Fools and children have angels to look after them—with politicians the case is slightly different. . .

In the fullness of their separate being uneasiness pervades the Rin. Anxiety swells, resolves into ever-intensifying awareness of the wretched desolation of insularity; the call for oneness wells from the abyss of Rin being. In the thrall of Convocation, the Rin proceed to initiate transmutation of their individual selves into the Aggregate clans.

Each Founder-Rin radiates identity and all others are drawn to the closest Founder.

One rather small Rin encounters an immediate obstacle. Though the Convocation tugs at his essence the Rin contains no desire to damage the barricade made by a Tender of the Smallest Friends. The little Rin does not wish to offend the Smallest Friends. Inching along the inside of the circular obstruction, the Rin seeks an opening. Following the little Rin—at an appropriately respectful distance—is the Tender.

Completing the circle and finding no opening, the Rin settles to the ground. . .perhaps if the Rin politely—oh, so very politely!—requests it of the Smallest Friends on the other side of the barricade they will instruct their Tender to make an opening.

Convocation tears at his essence and despair permeates the lonely Rin; no Smallest Friend has ever deigned to communicate with any Rin. But perhaps the smallest Friends though they remain silent as ever do understand, for suddenly the Tender moves swiftly to make an opening! Gratefully, the little Rin squinches through the space, exerting great care to cause no damage.

On the other side stretches a great expanse of the Smallest Friends. Gently and carefully, the little Rin (who is little only for a Rin) hoists his bulk through them.

Beyond the impassive, motionless Friends, the Rin flattens out and heeds the all-powerful call. No other hindrance slows his passage to the ultimate destiny of all Rin.

Despite the initial delay, the little Rin is one of the first to reach a Founder. So close, Convocation is overwhelming and the little Rin yields up all selfhood to the elder being. Individual identity fades. The little Rin is melding into unity with the Founder.

In his final moment of individual identity the little Rin senses a softness between his body and that of the Founder. With deep sadness he comprehends that it is one of the Tenders and as little Rin and Founder merge to unity, the Aggregate also experiences sharp regret at so damaging a servant of the strangely aloof Smallest Friends.

* * *

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COLONIST GLEN PHILIPS died crushed between two mushrocks. Dr. Jeroboam Dufour injected Sara Philips with a potent sedative and sprayed a salve-bandage over the chemical burns on her face, arms, and hands, then sat with her until she slept. As soon as he was certain she would not awake he stormed directly into the governor's office.

Governor Davis Buford asked quietly, "How's Sara?"

"Asleep." Dufour snapped. "Why did you have her brought here? She'd've been all right on the farm. I don't particularly appreciate having myself and my patient hustled at gunpoint halfway across the continent."

"Would an apology help?"

"No!"

The governor sighed. "I thought not."

"An explanation would, Buffy." Dr. Dufour settled into a chair across from a desk cluttered with the octuplicate forms of the burgeoning bureaucracy of the Capella 3 Colonial Government.

"Of course, Jare," Buford smiled a practiced official smirk. "Sara's a friend. So was Glen. I couldn't leave her out there alone with hired hands. Those men aren't the most savory characters, as we both know." He attenuated his pitch into suggestiveness.

Dufour glared. "I was there. I would have been with her and you knew it. Rafe Carter's not one of your felonious imports; I could leave my farm to my foreman and stay with Sara—being the only medic on Mycotare, I've had to arrange things so I could be away for long periods. Explanation not accepted!"

The governor's eyes opened wide. He frowned, then formed a rueful grin. "Why, Jare, I never thought! Of course, you. . . ."

"Don't get coy with me, Buffy! What's gone wrong?"

Buford cocked his head. The gubernatorial expression slipped a fraction. What do you mean?"

Jeroboam Dufour snapped onto his feet. Hunching his considerable bulk forward, he braced his fists on the governor's desk. "Save that supercilious pose for your political friends or for the Earthcol representatives. I treated Sara Philips for acid burns—not the base burns you normally get off a mushrock." The doctor straightened and clamped his hands behind his back. His black eyes turned cold. "What are you hiding, Gov? Murder?"

For one hasty moment, the governor's eyes narrowed. Soft-faced, he purred, "Of course not! Are you saying I could accuse Sara of such a thing?" Then he forced the neighborly grin reserved for colonists onto his face. "Do sit down, Jare. I'll get a crick in my neck staring up at you. We're *friends;* surely you don't have to overwhelm me with your admittedly impressive physical presence?"

Dr. Dufour sat. He hrumphed.

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"Sorry, Buffy. It's not murder. You've got something classified."

"Oh?" mouthed Buford.

"Glen was dead before those rocks ever came together."

After a pause, the governor asked, "You saw that?"

"No," countered Dufour. "All I saw of Glen was a hand and his head sticking out from the rocks. I listened to Sara before I sedated her. Those two mushrocks were moving toward each other and Glen went in between them to retrieve a shovel. He was trapped. Some sort of tentacle went right through him. Sara tried to get him loose but more of the things ate through him before she could; that's how she got burned. Glen was already dead when Rafe pulled her off. Rafe did see it, Buffy."

"Ah," sighed Governor Buford, "perhaps we should bring Rafe Carter in as well. He may well have been burned."

"He wasn't, and I wouldn't try arresting him. Rafe won't have a patient to protect."

"Arrest!"

"You call it what you want. Can I walk past your guards?"

"I'd hoped you might stay a while for Sara."

"Thought so," said Dufour. "It's the mushrocks."

"What is?"

"The information you're suppressing; the mushrocks are on the move."

"There's nothing unusual in that. We've known since the original survey that the mushrocks occasionally travel about." Buford's official grin faded before Dufour's glare.

"We've known that they reproduce by fission and that the newbies separate. Never has there been any incident where the fungoids moved toward each other and they have always kept exact distances from each other. In fact, I've had one fenced in my yard for several years and though its range was severely limited the surrounding mushrocks kept precisely the same distance from it as from each other. I'd gotten rather attached to that little fellow.

Several days ago he, er, it got restless and started circling the edge of the enclosure. Finally it hunkered down and stayed put. Then I opened the gate and it left—minced across my fields without damaging a single mushroom—and headed in the direction of the Philips farm."

The governor steepled his fingers and touched the tips to his mouth. "Wouldn't it be ironic if your pet was the one that killed Glen?"

"It was," murmured Dufour. "I knew every curve, every blemish, every blend of coloring on that rock—but I'm not about to accuse an overgrown mushroom of premeditated murder!"

"Those 'overgrown mushrooms,' as you call them, are creating havoc on Mycotare." Buford slammed his fist onto the desk. "All right. Dr. Dufour, you are second in com-

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mand of this colony and you have a right to know. Reports have been coming in from all over the planet. These movements could wipe out this year's crop. That would mean disaster for the colony since this year's profit will provide the final payment to Earthcol. If we miss that final payment, the interest converts to one hundred percent and Earth Colonial Administration retains 51 percent of our stock. We remain colonists forever. We've worked too hard and too long to lose out now." The governor's voice rang and trembled in fervid passion.

Dufour snorted. "We! When did you ever tend a mushroom!"

"Jare, colonial administration isn't exactly 'play!"

"I didn't mean that, Buffy, but don't pull that fellow farmer clap on me. I helped start this colony and you've only been here five years."

"Four and a half."

"Four and a half Earth years! You don't even tell time the same way we do. When we buy our independence, we elect the governor. You may not win that election, Buffy."

"Meaning you intend to run against me."

Dufour sighed, his attitude softening. "I don't know. I've got too much with the farm and the doctoring. We need more physicians and that has got to be one of our first priorities when we get out from under Earthcol and its stringent rules.

Another thing we've got to face once we lose colonial status is that we forfeit our colonial discount from suppliers. We're not self-supporting yet—not by a megayear we're not. Life never evolved beyond the protist stage here and we've got to complete vitalizing the soil to raise the crops we need to complete the food chain. We simply cannot afford to continue importing feed for our livestock. We're in a fine position to import hardware. We can hold off on industrial development but not on agricultural. We farmers know that—even if you don't!"

And I know that!" Buford rose and paced heavily. "Do you honestly believe I don't comprehend what problems we face as a free planet? We've located on a reasonably comfortable planet that does not happen to have the current capacity to grow food for us."

"Man does not live by mushrooms alone." Dufour grinned.

The governor groaned dutifully, secretly pleased at the improvement in Dufour's demeanor. "As long as transplanted Terrans don't lose their taste for mushrooms, which have so admirably mutated here into fleshier, tastier specimens. . . ."

"Nor their need for penicillin derivatives or molds for cheese or all those other good things we use fungi for. We're not exactly unilateral—and we've got potential new discoveries."

"Only potential?"

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"Sure! None of my experiments will be complete until after Independence Day—whenever it is. Earthcol's not going to get rights to our hard work." Dufour grinned. "We'll make it, Buffy. After all, business is mushrooming."

"Jeroboam! I certainly did not expect that from you!"

"Why? Did I steal your line?" Grinning hugely, Dufour continued. "Nevertheless, our suppliers could ruin us unless we can come to terms with them."

"They do seem to have us between a rock and a hard place."

"Or between two mushrocks," Dufour rasped. "What kind of pattern have you picked up from those reports?"

"Well," Buford hedged, "I haven't had time to go through them all."

"What?" Dufour asked, mystified. "What did we save our credits for fifteen years for? Haven't you fed them into that superfancy imported computer?"

"I haven't had time."

"Why can't your secretary do it?"

"You forget the secret nature of. . . ."

"Give me the reports!" Dufour loomed over the governor and stretched out his hand. "I'll set it for visual scan and it'll go as fast as I can feed the papers. Come on, give me the reports." He narrowed his eyes and waited. Without further word, Buford unlocked a drawer and pulled out several sheafs of flimsy paper and a half dozen video cartridges and passed them over.

The doctor snatched up the lot and stalked over to the computer outlet. He stuffed the first cartridge into the slot, set the intake to maximum, and dropped the others into the autofeed bin. Then, after slapping a series of switches, Dufour began slipping the pages of the flimsies into the computer's manual read-in. After a time his arms fell into the rhythm and as his eyes unfocused, he proceeded in a seeming trance.

The last page slipped in, flashed into the working banks, and was ionized. Jeroboam Dufour blinked, stretched, groaned, and rubbed stiffening back and shoulder muscles. He punched out a command to digest and summarize. A hand appeared in his side vision. It held a cup and, from the cup, rose a shimmery cloud. "Uh, thanks, Buffy."

"Thought you could use some coffee. I slipped out and got some."

"You still drinking that? Wish I had the money to afford such luxury." He sipped cautiously at the steaming brew. "Almost forgot what it tastes like. I may just like staying here for a while, after all!" The two laughed. Dufour thrummed his fingertips on the computer table until the readout snicked out of the side. He snapped it off and perused the summary. Columns of map coordinates interspersed with num-

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bers of entities. "Thorough!"

"Some of those cartridges included the satellite weather station pictures. I ordered a full-scale investigation as soon as I realized it was not a local phenomenon."

Dufour scratched his head, flipped the voder lever on the computer, and said, "Summarize your summary. No numbers. Verbal description of trend."

"Mushrocks are forming into aggregates within conscriptive boundaries. Earliest observed group movements toward a common center occurred along the equator. Movements expanded centripetally from equator progression to furthermost limits of mushrock range. Distance from equator and time of aggregation are directly correlative. Anticipate aggregate grouping of all mushrocks. Insufficient data for further prediction. Insufficient data for determination of cause. Jeroboam, without use of numbers, Angel cannot complete description."

"Who's Angel?" snapped Buford.

Grinning broadly, Dufour replied, "He is," and pointed to the computer outlet. "When I set up the verbal phase, I had to give him a voice; mine was the only one handy. And I named him." He leaned toward the microphone pickup. "Thanks, Angel. That is sufficient. I'll study your printout."

"Questions, Jeroboam?"

"Not yet. I don't read as fast as you do." Dufour looked toward the governor. "I'd like to take my time on these figures. Okay if I take the printout to my room, whever it is?"

"Keep it, Jare." Buford smiled, not entirely officially. "I got the complete reports for you, anyway, since I remembered your scientific curiosity." His expression firmed. "In the interest of the Capella 3 colony, I've already determined how to deal with the threat."

"How?"

"By destroying the mushrocks."

Each maintaining the proper social distance the Rin Aggregates rove their personal districts. The symmetrical procession is suspended now and then as an Aggregate daintily feeds on the richness beneath the surface of the soil. One Aggregate pauses and, with extreme distaste, absorbs the soft, offensive intrusion that is trapped between its parts. The Aggregate shudders convulsively at the flavor of the unfortunate Tender; but however brutishly inelegant it is unavoidable if the Aggregate is to survive. The unwelcome infringement is hindering total unity of the separate parts of this Aggregate. To be One and to achieve the highest destiny of the Rin—such a desire outweighs the hideously obscene task.

Afterwards the Aggregate rests, laboriously assimilating and transforming the unique composition of the Tender. . .

The embarrassing interruption has retarded the development of this Aggregate but now it feels the

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urgency. Some few of the former individuals composing the Aggregate separate from their positions and differentiate their forms. Their bodies secrete the matter to harden and stiffen the new growth. Others disconnect and climb up the rigid support. At the top they form a sphere.

The sphere grows and augments as the new life within pulses and strains. The Aggregate incorporates its essence into the myriad descendants encased in the sphere. "Grow and prosper, my children. Multiply in peace and harmony. Always remember that the Way is harmony and unity."

The sphere explodes. Each child, fully cognizant of Rinness and individuality, bursts headlong into freedom. All are heedless of the parent Rin as it shrinks into itself. Feeding stops. Awareness fades for the Rin Aggregate and soon it will be dead. For it has fulfilled the purpose of Rin being.

"You can't be serious?" Dufour gaped at the governor.

"Deadly serious. I hesitated too long and Glen Philips was killed. I've already ordered my troops out."

"Method?"

"Laser-induced combustion. The mushrocks burn quite readily if they're ignited all at once. If we set only one part afire, the thing drops off the burning segment." Buford laughed. "It's quite a sight to see one of those things go up."

Dufour bounded onto his feet. "Did you ever think what consequences there might be?"

"That's why I've acted as I did. Our colony is at stake."

"You're destroying a life-form!"

"Don't give me that, Jare. Even you called them overgrown mushrooms."

"What if they have an intelligence we don't recognize?"

"Bosh!" Governor Buford reclined in his contour chair. "That's why I'll be elected rather than you. I consider my people's needs. When their crops are in jeopardy, I act without any reflex-humanistic delay."

"You've not considered everything—ecological balance!"

"Ecological bull!" rapped the governor. "The colonists already upset that."

"Not upset. Changed. Modified. Everything done was studied and estimated as to outcome. You're removing in toto one sector of an ancient balance." Dufour collapsed onto the couch. He groaned, "Who knows what those mushrocks were keeping in check?"

"We'll handle that later."

"And what if 'that' is a dangerous enemy?"

"What do you think the mushrocks are?" raged Buford.

"They're not enemies! They haven't damaged the crops. They have not yet done anything against us."

Coldly, the governor said, "They killed Glen."

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"Accident!"

The radiocom flared into violent signals and a harsh voice distracted the governor. "Sir! Chief Truckee here. Coordinated lasering is doing the job okay but these things sure do stink when they burn! We just got on to one that had a stalk thing coming out of its back but before we could burn it a ball thing on top of the stalk split wide open and some powder flew off in all directions. We ran the powder through the lab and it's a bunch of baby mushrocks!"

Stepping to the radiocom, the governor ordered, "Step up the program. Double shifts round the clock. Go after the ones with stalks first and burn the powder too." Shutting down, Buford glared at Dr. Dufour. "That's the difference between an administrator and a farmer—or a doctor. I see the big picture and I act. I don't mollycoddle—anything or anyone! You understand me?"

Dufour's heart was thudding so powerfully he almost feared it would alarm the governor. He drawled carefully, "Yes, I do. You're a hard man, Buffy." He swallowed sourly. "Guess I'm just a curious sawbones." He tried to look official. "Anyway, I've got to make tests—take measurements and such. We don't have data on the new slug things and Earthcol will have your hide and mine for office decor if we don't get all possible info on a vanishing species." There ought to be some up near the winterlands that haven't come together yet. I should be able to stay far enough ahead of your incendiary troops to collect enough data for Earthcol."

Buford smirked. "I'll send an escort with you. You'll need somebody to. . .look after you."

Dufour managed a sheepish grin. "You're right. Once I forgot to eat for three days when I was watching a mutating. . .thanks, Buffy. You sure do think of everything. Give me the coordinates and I'll radio Rafe and have him bring my portalab."

* * *

Huddling over a small camping stove in the wind-blasted tent, Rafe Carter nodded to Jeroboam when he came through the double flaps. "Didn't think he'd let you go."

"You guessed I was a prisoner?"

"I smelled it. Something's upwind, sure."

"And I smell tea."

Carter extended a sweated mug of a dark and pungent liquid. "Sure do. Ground up the rhizopus myself. Don't worry about the gov'mint boys. They don't know about it."

"Which rhizopus?" Jeroboam let the aroma warm his chilled nostrils.

"Mixture. Three kinds. Figured it out myself. Like it?"

"Yeah! I hope you remember the proportions."

"I do. Wait till Independence!

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We'll hit the market with our fungus tea. Hey, Doc, we might just get rich one of these days."

Jeroboam Dufour grinned at his dark foreman. "If Davey Buford doesn't do us all in before." He frowned and chuckled warmly. "We better not call it fungus tea. We should devise some fancy handle."

"You'll come up with something. Speaking of up, what is? I got a whiff of big trouble in your voice when you called. I came equipped and the escorts don't know that either." The burly foreman patted his jacket.

"I don't know. Could be nothing. Could be disaster. Buford's launched an all out extermination program against the mushrocks and the slugs they turned into."

"He can't do that!" yelped Carter.

"He's doing it. We need a way to stop it. With the mushrocks yanked out of the ecosystem, their natural food will multiply. Maybe we can't handle that, though we probably can."

"The cost of controlling the subsurface slideybugs might break us." Carter frowned.

"What bothers me is the possibility there's something else we don't know about. Something they keep from bothering us now."

The foreman rattled a pan and tossed in a hefty chunk of steak. In another smaller pan, he fanned wafer slices of hollow-stemmed morels; they spattered in the golden liquid. "Butter. Figured you'd need the best this jaunt." For several moments, he concentrated on sauteeing the delicate mushroom slabs. He turned the steak and said, "Didn't Buford think about the dangers when he went off on this wild slug chase?"

"I'm sure it's a political ploy to impress his future voters."

"He doesn't impress me!"

"Nor me! He's overlooked—either deliberately or unconsciously—some factors which could be vital."

Carter slapped the massive steak onto one plate, slashed it in half and edged the slightly larger half onto another plate. After spooning browned slices of mushrooms over the top, he handed the second plate to Dufour. "Jeroboam, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Why?" Dufour gnawed on the steak.

"I dunno. I just got a feeling."

"I always trust your hunches and this time I've got one too. Come first light, we'll get a close look at the congregating."

"Right! I spotted a loner that looks like it's going to hook up tomorrow. Only about half a mile off."

"Lucky! With those coordinates Buffy tossed out, I thought we'd be set down spang in the middle of the snowlands." Silently the men ate, occasionally nodding at each other in mutual enjoyment. Jeroboam set down his plate. "Rafe, did you ever

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consider cooking as a profession?''

''What, and stay inside all the time? No way, Doc! I like riding herd on your mushrooms and your cows.''

Sliding into his sleeping sack, Jeroboam set the heat control and grinned. ''One of these days we'll get that horse and you really will be riding.''

''If I can ever cut him loose from your kids!''

The two men listened to the night noises of the northern latitudes. The wind carried the sounds of coarse voices from the trooper escort in their flimsy tents. Jeroboam muttered, ''I can't let them kill off the mushrocks. I got a hunch our neighbors might be super-protists, intelligent unicellular-beings.

''Well I'll be damned!—They do act pretty bright sometimes.''

''We probably both will be,'' commented Jeroboam Dufour and rolled over.

The next morning they began their study.

Openly distrustful of the mushrocks, the escort troopers maintained several lengths between themselves and the moving organisms. Carter grinned at Dufour. ''Staying that far back, they sure won't bother us.''

''It's starting!'' Jeroboam pointed to a protuberance, little more than a swollen knob, on the leading edge of the single mushrock as it approached the conglomerate. While they watched, filming the process, the knob grew, changing colors in rainbow hues. Then, with astonishing speed, a strand shot from the rock to the collection and attached firmly. Touching the strand with a long probe, the doctor tested its tensile strength. ''Tough but resilient.'' Scraping a bit of the moisture from the tendril, he fed it to the portalab. ''Concentrated hydrosulfuric acid!'' He positioned certain recording devices and glanced around. ''How's it look?''

''Clear so far. The next one won't be here till tomorrow afternoon. They move a lot slower in the cold latitudes.'' Carter stared toward the shining milky facade to the north. ''Wind's coming off that snow.'' He shivered.

''Damnation!''

''What's the matter, Doc?''

Jeroboam stooped to pick up the electrode he had dropped. ''Trying to hook up and my fingers are getting stiff. But I can't manage these wires with gloves on.''

''Here, let me.'' Carter slipped off his right glove and took up the wire. He edged into the opening and reached up his arm to loop the wire over the single fastened tendril while Dufour secured the other end to record electrical impulses.

Jeroboam saw the beginning of a startling triple sine curve at the same instant he heard the hoarse yelp. ''Rafe!''

A second tendril extended through Carter's right forearm. The cloth of his heavy jacket was jagged

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and burned about the edges of the hole. Carter ground his teeth. "I never even saw it." He forced a stiff grin. "Quick as lightning. Something else for your records. Burns like hell."

Jeroboam Dufour examined the flesh after he tore away the cloth. He paled. "It's between the bones. I'll have to cut it." From the portalab toolbox, he pulled out a scalpel, snicked it on and touched the keen edge to the tendril. The tendril bent but did not yield.

Softly, Carter muttered, "Jeroboam. Behind you."

And behind Dufour showed multiple swollen knobs on the encroaching mushrock. Each flashed its own special rainbow and swelled alarmingly.

"Jerry, get me out of here," Carter whispered.

Jeroboam's throat constricted. "I can't cut you out!"

Rafe Carter leveled his dark gaze into Dufour's eyes. "Jerry, for godsake, help me," he said softly.

Dr. Dufour extended the blade of the scalpel to its full length. He meshed his teeth and slashed the merciless blade through his friend's elbow.

★ ★ ★

The Elver awoke from the Long Sleep. Cautiously, the wily creature extended his senses through the inner shell. The outer shell was truly dissolving! The senses spread and tingled lightly upon the surrounding countryside.

Within the range of the Elver's sensing dwelt not one single Rin!

Ah, but this Elver had been fooled before. Once he was nearly trapped by a clever Rin who had blocked Elver-sensing of Rin presence.

The Elver concentrated sensing to within one elver-length. So concentrated that not even a Rin Aggregate could deceive.

Slowly the inner shell weakened dissolved vanished beneath the Great Light. The Elver squirmed until his tender flesh clouded against the light.

Then the Elver became true Elver. He lifted and floated weakly, hovering close to the ground. He knew he must find food quickly even if only to spore again to save him from the Rin.

Suddenly the Elver quivered. He sensed food close by and he hugged the ground. This food was strange and moved freely along the ground. Yet he sensed it was good. The swiftly moving prey stepped stupily into the Elver. It struggled though the weak thrashings did not discommode the Elver. He absorbed the unique food.

The energy of the food burst into the Elver. He quivered shivered shuddered contained the inexplicably enormous amount of food energy. Joy threaded through the Elver and he launched into the sky.

He roamed, all powerful, seeking

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more of the energy-packed food. He sensed another another another. A small group of the new food was below him.

He dropped and absorbed the amazing new food that had appeared during his Long Sleep.

* * *

The computer said, *"Jeroboam?"*

"Yes, Angel?"

"Report under heading Unusual Life-form Activity. Source: Radio contact from trooper camp zero slash four oh zee."

"Location?"

"Near the equator and on the Philips Farm. Radio contact mentions a grey cloud engulfing Trooper Lanson. Total absorption. No remains. No further radio contact from that base in seven hours and twelve minutes."

"How many mushrocks in that sector?"

"Base had previously reported all located mushrocks in their sector burned and destroyed. Additional note.

Governor Buford is attempting to monitor clinic outlet."

"Thank you, Angel."

"You're welcome, Jeroboam."

Jeroboam stalked into the clinic ward and leaned over Rafe Carter, whose black skin glistened with sweat. "How's it going?"

"My fingers still hurt." Rafe managed a hazy grin. "Nobody's told my nerves they're not there."

Jeroboam opened his mouth, shrugged, and closed it again.

"Jeroboam," whispered the groggy foreman, "you did right." He swallowed. "Trust my hunch. Amputation is better than death. A lot better."

Jeroboam Dufour headed down the hall toward the governor's quarters. He was stopped in the anteroom by an armed set of troopers. Their leader said, "Sorry, Doctor. Governor's orders. Strip."

Rigidly, Dufour removed his clothes and stood stiffly beneath searching fingers. One guard probed his clothing at length. The lead trooper stood back and snapped, "Turn around. Bend over."

Jeroboam suffered this final indignity and donned his clothes in scarlet silence. Once inside, he said gruffly, "Is it everybody you don't trust or just me, Buffy?"

"Surely my guards weren't rough with you, Jare."

"Not rough," growled Jeroboam. "They didn't have to enjoy it so much."

"Boys will be boys."

"Not with me they won't!" All at once, Dufour laughed hugely. "Some of your felonious imports, I take it." He noted a black box on the table in the dining room. "I hope your checkout boys weren't rough on my special baby."

"They followed your orders precisely and didn't touch the contents. And I, true to my word," he handed over a key, "have not

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peeked at all, though I anxiously await."

"Did your chef get my flat of truffles?"

"Yes."

"I sent him the flat they were raised in, undisturbed; and your chef is almost as much an expert in mushrooms as I am."

"Yes, I saw them myself." Buford relaxed visibly. "They are beautiful. Mutations?"

"No, they just grow better here. I've been culling for years and that's my best flat," Jeroboam smiled. "I had to do something to thank you for letting us take Rafe to my farm for surgery before transporting him all the way here."

"Of course," purred Buford. "Your farm is well equipped and much closer to the winterlands."

"Though I must admit," murmured Jeroboam, "I ought to take my truffles back after your welcoming committee outside!"

"Now, Jare, do forgive me their thoroughness." Buford forged the gubernatorial grin. "But I will have a talk with them in the morning."

Jeroboam placed the key on top of the cubical black box and seated himself at one end of the table. "When do we eat?" He chuckled nasally as his pulse quickened. "Sorry to be so rude but I haven't eaten since last night."

Ringing for service, Governor Buford nodded. "Forgetful as usual, eh, Jare?"

Though he was famished, Jeroboam found his stomach cramping in nervous rebellion at his forced eating. Sweat tickled his face and he noted Buford staring. "More tired than I realized." He forced a weak grin.

The governor grinned back. "If you intended for me to eat toxic mushrooms, you've killed only yourself. You alone ate your special present to me, Dr. Dufour. My chef had special orders."

Jeroboam slumped in the plush dining chair. His chortle became a laugh, a guffaw. "So! That reception outside your doors *was* for me. You're being foolish." He leaned forward and said gravely, "I'm not going to kill you. You may be destroying the colony but I'm not going to kill you. You may be destroying an intelligent lifeform. . . ."

"Nonsense!"

"Your escort brought in my recorders and I just had time to check them out. The mushrocks give off signals remarkably similar to alpha brain waves—among others. They're very likely intelligent."

"Balderdash!"

"Hadn't heard that one in a while. Buffy, you are not only foolish, you are absurd. But I am not going to kill you." He paused, head throbbing. "Only an angel can do that."

Buford snapped his glance toward the computer outlet in the dining room. "You've tampered with the computer."

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"Do you really think so? Angel!"

"Yes, Jeroboam."

"If I told you to kill Governor Buford, what would you do?"

"Nothing."

"Why?"

"I am not equipped to respond in that area."

"Computer!" The voice was Buford's.

"Yes, Governor."

"If you were equipped with appropriate extensors, would you obey a command to kill me?"

"Yes, if the command comes from Jeroboam."

Davis Buford produced a thermal pistol and leveled it at Jeroboam's head. "We'll see to that. I'll reprogram your pet angel so you won't have access. You will release it from all personal private codes. If you don't," he compressed the trigger handle, "it won't make any difference."

Jeroboam smiled languidly. "Don't be silly. That computer is no angel of death. The name is only a term to describe a disembodied voice." He paused, then; "Well, I thought you were excited about the early completion of one of my experiments." He jerked his chin toward the black box. "I won't even touch it; you open it. Your boys have already done it once so you know it's not boobied."

"I mean what I said about the computer. You will be programed out of it in the morning." Still holding the pistol, the governor pulled the box toward him. He inserted the key and turned it slowly. The box opened flat to display a single mushroom.

Tall, stately, white as purest marble, it stood in unblemished perfection. Jeroboam Dufour swelled his chest. "Touch her," he breathed. "Isn't she beautiful?" His eyes gleamed. "Feel how smooth her flesh is. Gently, Buffy. She's about to drop her spores. That's it. Look very closely. You won't find an imperfection anywhere. Even the veil near the top of the stem is perfect." Jeroboam watched the governor as he set the pistol aside to run his fingers over the snowy specimen. "She's eight years old and almost exactly twelve inches tall. Isn't she lovely? A mutation, of course."

"I've never seen one like this. You have others?"

"Yes, but this was the most perfect and the only one ready to spore."

"Do you have a complete report ready?"

"It won't take any time at all to reproduce my notes."

The governor rubbed his stomach and blinked. "What exactly is the purpose of this one?"

"Does she need a purpose? Only see how lovely she is to see and touch."

"Earthcol isn't engaged in the business of conducting shows and awarding prizes. What do we get

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out of this one?'' The governor rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes and gasped.

''We? You mean they, don't you?'' smiled Dufour. ''Feeling a bit strange? Just nerves, Buffy, like me. Relax.''

Buford doubled over and groaned sharply. He flopped into his chair. ''Jare, I'm sick.''

''You're not sick, Buffy.'' Dufour droned, ''You wanted to know the purpose of my lovely white darling. She's a mutated Amanita bisporigera.''

''The destroying angel!''

''Deadly poison. Always fatal.''

''You're the fool, Doctor Dufour. I'll not eat any of your toadstool.''

''Hush! Don't insult her. At any rate, you don't have to. You've breathed the fumes and absorbed the toxin through your skin. This Amanita is deadlier than any ancestral Earth mushroom.'' When Buford snatched the pistol and wavered it toward Jeroboam, the doctor leaned back in his chair and drawled, ''It's better to amputate. I'm amputating. The colony will survive as a unit even though one part of it does not.''

''I'll kill you.'' The governor grasped the pistol in both hands.

Jeroboam murmured, ''I hope so. If not, I've got to live with the fact I let you die.''

''Can you save me?'' Buffy whispered.

''I've touched her. I've breathed her perfume for years. I've developed an immunity—and an antidote which was one purpose of my research.''

''Save me, Jare!'' The governor wheezed.

Dr. Dufour strode to the end of the table.

The pistol waveringly followed him.

''Jeroboam.''

''What is it, Angel?''

''Fact: the colony has only one physician. Fact: the colony has one governor. Situation: the governor is dying. The physician is second in command. If both are dead, the colony is without experienced leadership and medical assistance in the last year of colonial status. Conclusion: permanent colonial status.''

The pistol quavered and the governor's fleshy fingers tightened around the trigger handle. Jeroboam lunged and seized the governor's wrists. As he tugged at the governor's death grip, his face came close to Buford's. Dr. Dufour stared into the clouding eyes; he felt the gasping breaths warm his cheek.

The pistol hissed. The edge of the beam caressed Jeroboam's skin and he shivered in agony.

Then Davis Buford slid from his chair to lie rumpled on the polished floor.

Jeroboam stood back and stared down at his demolished shirt and blistered skin. Gazing sadly at the stately, elegant Amanita, he retrieved the pistol from Buford's limp hand. He touched the corners

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of the governor's eyes and pushed the lids down.

Jeroboam whispered, "I forgot to mention this variety kills within minutes instead of hours."

"Governor."

"He's dead, Angel."

"Governor Jeroboam."

"Oh!"

"You instructed Angel to inform you when the Earthcol representative settled orbit."

"I did?" Jeroboam rubbed his eyes.

"The governor did. You are the governor."

"Not for long."

"Until the election following Independence. Shall Angel quote the pertinent article and section?"

"No. I know it. Just until then, however."

"Prediction: no opposition candidate will result in unanimous election of Jeroboam Dufour to governorship."

"Who asked you?"

"You programed Angel to respond appropriately."

"Respond to this, then. I am a physician. I have just killed a man." Jeroboam waited.

Tiny clickings shattered the dreary silence.

"Amputation is preferable to death."

"You were listening to Rafe and me!"

"No. When you programed Angel, you installed your own personality."

"You are as amoral as an angel."

"No. Seventy-three circuits shorted. Angel is now using new pathways."

"Let us hope the doctor can find new neural pathways!"

"The doctor is homo sapiens and therefore has more potential circuits than Angel who is computer Model C dash 12."

"The doctor is human and has violated his oath." Jeroboam glanced at the Amanita. "The colony will need a new doctor." He straightened his shoulders. "If I'm to be governor, I'll need a full time physician. We'll treat with the Earthcol man. Program his shuttle in on auto." The doctor's voice went steady. "Activate your weather satellite contact and locate some mushrocks. Thin the population and transport specimens to the equator until that grey cloud is stopped."

"There are two clouds now, Governor."

"Hustle it, then. I'll stop Buffy's extermination teams. We might still get to know our mushrock neighbors after all. Perhaps we shouldn't call them 'mushrocks' any more; they're not like mushrooms at all." He laughed hugely. "Myxomycophyta! Lowly slime molds and they're intelligent!" As he punched the code for the trooper team leader into the radio, he grimaced. "Angel, our little joke isn't funny anymore. From now on, answer to 'Liberty'." ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Spider Robinson

More Than Human, Theodore Sturgeon, Ballantine, 188 pp., $1.50
The Mote In God's Eye, Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle, Simon & Schuster, 537 pp., $9.95
The Dispossessed, Ursula K. LeGuin, Harper & Row, 341 pp., $7.95
Born With The Dead, Robert Silverberg, Vintage, 256 pp., $1.95
The Book of Poul Anderson, Poul Anderson, DAW, 284 pp., $1.50
Caution! Inflammable, Thomas N. Scortia, Doubleday, 228 pp., $5.95
Have Space Suit—Will Travel, Robert A. Heinlein, Ace, 255 pp., $1.25
Between Planets, Robert A. Heinlein, Ace, 190 pp., $1.25
Pluribus, Michael Kurland, Doubleday, 184 pp., $5.95
The Swarm, Arthur Herzog, Signet, 275 pp., $1.95
Science Past—Science Future, Isaac Asimov, Doubleday, 346 pp., $8.95
Venus On The Half-Shell, "Kilgore Trout", Dell, 204 pp., 95¢

* * *

LOOK, AS A MATTER OF COURSE I have to assume that all you zombies out there are just like me: diletantes of reading. By this I mean that your standards are not too high. You go through at least a couple of paperbacks a week, and don't insist that they all be Dostoievski. We can talk of a book as "great," you and I, without meaning that future generations of graduate students will count its adverbs and try to prove that it was really written by Sir Francis Bacon. There is no copy of *Moby Dick* on my bookshelf, and I don't care who knows it.

But I want to talk to you now about a book concerning which the

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term "great" *should* have all those massive connotations, a book which bears multiple re-readings and is stupendously entertaining, enlightening and mind-broadening even once.

If you have already read Theodore Sturgeon's immortal *More Than Human,* you're permitted to skip this section and go on—*if* you've read it recently. It is, for my money, one of the all-time Greats of the fantasy-SF tradition. I picked up the most recent edition (I think) off the bookstore rack (as part of the policy I announced last month of imitating you, the hypothetical reader), because I hadn't re-read it in nearly a decade—and I was completely blown out.

Either a short novel or a very long novelette by word-count, *More Than Human* is the direct antithesis of the silly canard that great literature must imply "a recognition of the fallen state of Man," and it's astonishing that this book has been quietly sitting there waiting to be noticed for twenty-two years (to give you an idea just how *long* ago that was, nineteen years ago the Hugo for most promising new author went to someone named Silverberg).

Oh, it was noticed, all right. It won the International Fantasy Award, made pots of money, solidly established Ted's reputation as a genius, and has undergone an entirely respectable number of reprintings. But it never copped a Hugo (none were given that year; the world's first had only been awarded the year before), never became the kind of cult classic that *Dune* or *Stranger* did, and I just know that enough of you have never read it to make this whole polemic worthwhile.

Darwin pissed off a whole lot of people with the notion that mankind had evolved from base origins. Perhaps equally humbling is the notion that we are *still* "base origins"—of the next evolutionary step. *More Than Human* suggests just that, tracing a progression from proconsul to Neanderthal to Homo Sap to . . . . . Homo Gestalt. I don't want to tell you any of the plot—discover it for yourself—so all I can say is that it'll be a godsend to any of you out there who are tired of believing that the stale and rancid bucket of worms you've been seeing on TV and reading in your paper and in dismal books by despairing writers is Life, that the place we have reached is only the precipice from which we must surely tumble, that the only place to go from here is more refined and intricate perversions and a philosophical acceptance of the inevitable decay. Wouldn't it be funny if this were only the beginning?

The only other thing to mention is that the middle third first appeared as the novelette "Baby Is Three" twenty-three years ago—in *Galaxy*.

* * *

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Back to modern-day science-fiction, and what do we find? A brand-new Stutz Bearcat.

Think about that a second. You wouldn't want an authentic Stutz—the state of the art in those days did not include fripperies like starters, shock absorbers or climate control, and they had a top speed below the current legal minimum. But suppose the ghost of Old Man Stutz came back, and built the ultimate 'Cat, using the best materials and technology available today (which Detroit sure doesn't), and gave it to you factory-new? I bet it'd beat hell out of a Toyota.

Well, in a manner of speaking, it's happened. Under the combined influence of the ghosts of Doc Smith and C.S. Forrester (not to mention lots of coffee and brandy), Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle have written the ultimate space opera, blending all the classic ingredients in a work unmistakably modern and new: *The Mote In God's Eye*.

As near as I can figure out, Messrs. Niven & Pournelle haven't left out a single thing: we have genital-less protagonists (named Rod and Sally, forsooth), comic-opera Scots and Russians unchanged in stereotype by the centuries (ever wonder what Ensign Chekhov would be like *as an admiral?*), a Gilbert & Sullivan space navy in which Horatio Hornblower would feel right at home, and even aliens with a Strange and Terrible Secret. Every element of a vintage '30s classic is present (except, curiously, for the spectacular space warfare itself—no planets get hurled around, or any of that noise), and there's even room left at the end for a sequel. (*The Mote In God's Other Eye?*)

This all may sound to some of you like I'm panning the book, but I'm not—not by any means. It's a damned fine novel of first contact, delicately walking that tightrope between really *alien* and really *unbelievable* aliens in a way that reminded me of Gordon R. Dickson's *The Alien Way*. The evolutionary history of *Mote*'s Moties strained my credibility a bit, but no more than bees do; and their cycle-psychology was extremely well worked out. The Strange And Terrible Secret really *is*, and its suspense is built up masterfully to a blockbuster single-word resolution that left me gasping with relief. Throughout, Niven & Pournelle display a positive genius for infusing time-honored ingredients with new life and vitality. I found *Mote* delightful, superior in every way to its honored forebears—why, the science in it won't be hilariously out-of-date for years!

Thanks to Larry and Jerry, "they don't write 'em like they used to" is no longer only irrelevant—it's untrue. You can't keep a good subgenre down.

* * *

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Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* is one of those unique books that should satisfy just about everybody. In fact, it seems to have done that very thing. It scored the Nebula in a year of stiff competition; by the time you read this it may very well have copped the Hugo over in Melbourne; and my Aunt Euphonia, who reads nothing but the TV Guide these days, tells me it looks just lovely on the coffee table.

Ms. LeGuin's protagonist is Shevek, a man who in the words of Leon Russell is trying to stay alive and keep his sideburns too. A physicist so gifted that hardly anyone can understand his field of study, Shevek hails from Anarres, an isolationist planet settled several generations ago (by colonists from the mother world Urras) as an experimental "anarchist-socialist" utopia. Life is hard on Annares, and the anarchist bureaucracy (!) does not encourage physics so abstruse that it approaches philosophy—as Mark Twain said, this butters no parsnips. So Shevek obtains permission to vist Urras, a capitalist world where the spirit of scientific inquiry seems to have more room to grow. The results shouldn't surprise any of you hardened cynics, but Shevek's solution forms a delightful surprise, science's perfect answer to a warlike race demanding instant miracles. They get a genuine miracle—which is *not* what they wanted.

All that is plot, however. The *story* is a the tragedy of a man who, because he is a human being rather than a camp follower, finds that he is truly dispossessed, with no direction home. True freedom, Shevek learns, is only available to those who have learned not to ask too many questions. His story and his character are drawn with superb skill by Ms. LeGuin, as are those of Shevek's wife and all the characters in the work if it comes to that. As I began *Dispossessed,* I was furious with Ms. LeGuin for allowing her parable, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," to take the Short Story Hugo from George Martin's magnificent "With Morning Comes Mistfall."

But I've provisionally decided to forgive her on the strength of this book.

* * *

Onward. I'm having fun this month: I liked virtually everything I read (which indicates only that I was selective in my reading. Maybe next month I'll have an entire column of dissected turkeys for you).

Born With The Dead by Robert Silverberg was a particular favorite. Now this is a paradoxical saying. "Born With The Dead," the first of the three novellas (" . . . about the spirit of Man," says the subtitle) I did not finish; in fact I stopped reading after about ten pages, and have not reconsidered. The second, "Thomas The Proclaimer," held

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my attention and interest throughout, but its theme finally seemed to be, "God Himself couldn't help us now, if He literally wrote in the sky," which I reject outright (I believe this story appeared with stories by Gordon Dickson and someone else in a theme antho about "What If the Earth Stood Still for 24 Hours?" but I can't name it or its editor. Being the only fan in Nova Scotia makes it hard to maintain Reviewer's Omniscience—I have only my own brain to tap).

But the third novella, "Going," is just so achingly superb as to be worth even the larcenous two bucks Vintage gets for a book these days. It concerns a man caught at the point between living and dying, seeking a valid reason to do either, and it is purely peachy. To say any more would spoil it—go read the thing.

You know, it's a funny thing about Silverbob—whether you like a given story of his or not, you can't help but notice that he invariably writes about real stuff—you know, death, pain, love, life, like that. Courageous writer. In "Going," it really pays off.

* * *

I spoke a moment ago of "Reviewer's Omniscience," and the difficulty of preserving the said front with no fan friends around to brain-pick. Last month, I actually reviewed a Poul Anderson collection, *Homeward And Beyond*, without mentioning that "Goat Song," therein contained, won the Hugo for Best Novelette in 1973. There was no memory-jogging mention in the *book*, mind you, but I know I'll get letters just the same.

The only way to make it up to you and to Poul is to mutually enrich you by next putting in the spotlight *The Book of Poul Anderson*. It appeared in 1974 as a hardcover under the Chilton label as *The Many Worlds Of. . .*, edited by Roger Elwood (who doesn't get cover credit on this edition), and it has now become the latest (and one of the better) additions to DAW's *Book Of . . .* series.

Of the stories contained, "Queen of Air And Darkness" is clearly a gem; "Epilogue" is *so* stinking good that I can't imagine why it didn't cop the 1963 Hugo when it ran in *Analog* thirteen years ago; "The Longest Voyage" is a beautiful example of what a great yarn can be made from a clichéd plot; "The Sheriff Of Canyon Gulch" (written in collaboration with Gordy Dickson) is so sidesplittingly funny as to prove that good drinking buddies make good writing buddies (how about that, Larry and Jerry?); and Sandra Miesel's essay "Challenge And Response" is a thoughtful and incisive overview of the body of Poul's work, reprinted from *Riverside Quarterly*.

Now, on the other hand, "Tomorrow's Children," Poul's first

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published story, reads like it; the admittedly great "Journey's End" has been overanthologized and then some; Patrick McGuire's critical essay, "Her Strongest Enchantments Failing," is too damn long and not a patch on Miesel's; "Day of Burning" is a Falkayn/Adzel/Chee Lan story (i.e. space opera) and not very good compared to some in that series; and "A World Named Cleopatra," billed by DAW as "a story written just for this book alone," is in fact not a story at all, but merely a description in depth (with no characters or plot whasoever) of A World Named Cleopatra on which a story might have been set. This last in particular leaves me feeling ripped off—Cleopatra, as exhaustively described (i.e. created) could have hosted a damn fine story, and I didn't get it. Dammit, I'd been specifically promised quote a story end quote, and it makes me salty.

But there you go—a collection with some supreme high spots, some just good stuff, and a little bit of mediocre. What more can you ask from a single-author collection in these troubled times?

If I forgot to include any award citations *this* time, you know what to do with them.

* * *

Another single-author collection! You mean I have to find *another* variation on "some were good, some were bad, some were so-so" (the utterly inevitable comment for any collection at all)? I think what I'm going to start doing with collections is give them percentile scores based on number-I-liked against total-number-offered (on that basis Poul's collection above gets a 65%; a slight minus on "Journey's End" for overfamiliarity being more than outweighed by a large bonus for "Epilogue").

Okay then: *Caution! Inflammable* (my mama told me to be wary of books with an exclamation point in the title), by Thomas N. Scortia, gets a fat 45%. Out of twenty stories, I found nine worth recommending. Of these, "Sea Change," "When You Hear The Tone," The Worm In The Rose," "Woman's Rib," and "The Bomb In The Bathtub" were outstanding, the latter being a hilarious old favorite of mine which first saw print in *Galaxy* in 1957. I just wish you didn't have to wade through the rest to get to 'em. Oh, most of the rest are at least inoffensive, but I can't even say *that* about the title story, "Gee Wurlitzer! It's A Dad!" (*two* exclamations in a single title is the kiss of certain death), "Old, Old Death In New, New Venice," and "The Weariest River."

Thomas Scortia may be familiar to you as the man who, with Frank Robinson, wrote *The Glass Inferno*, an exploitation of the current disaster craze that became the movie *The Towering Inferno*. Give you an

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idea? The stories I disliked seemed to lack the very quality which Ted Sturgeon, in his introduction, calls Scortia's particular virtue: caring. Some stories bore out Ted's claim: in "When You Hear the Tone" in particular, Scortia obviously cares deeply (and makes you care) for a basically unlovable character. But he seems to do it as a parlor trick; in some stories his characters seem to arouse only his mild contempt, and in others even that is too strong a term.

* * *

Okay, time for a labor of love. There's time enough for love, isn't there?

Which should be enough hint. The love in question is mine for Robert A. Heinlein, who first instilled in me (at age five) an abiding love for SF which has made my life the reeling farrago it is today. He did so with an astounding (pun intended) series of what have come to be known as Heinlein Juveniles: SF for young readers. One of Ace's great coups in the last five years has been to acquire title to these magnificent classics, and they're reprinting them at a rate of one a month until they run out—which could take awhile.

I had the great fortune to meet Mr. Heinlein at the last Nebula affair (at which the Grandmaster Nebula was created specifically to honor his lifetime contribution to the SF genre), and the great honor to converse with (read: listen to) him for nearly half an hour. During that time he explained to me the philosophy behind the Juveniles: "write an ordinary SF novel as well as you know how—then cut the sex." He explained that kids hate being talked down to as much as if not more than grown-ups—and I suddenly began to understand why I had fallen so deeply in love with him at an early age.

So let me call your attention to the two Ace reprints I've received so far, *Have Space Suit—Will Travel* and *Between Planets*. I thought I was familiar with both, but re-reading proved me wrong: they're *better* than I remembered.

Space Suit is handicapped as much by its title as by the Juvenile label/stigma, but it is clearly the superior of the two. In depth of characterization, plausibility, color, adventure, scope and science content it is the equal of anything the Master ever wrote, and The Mother Thing (a Vegan cop) is one of the most fascinating and unforgettable characters in all literature. The protagonist is Kip Russell, a high-school senior who wins a used space suit as consolation prize in a soap contest (he was hoping to win a trip to the Moon) and ends up in the Lesser Magellanic Cloud; and the theme is that luck is a matter of careful preparation and skull-sweat.

Between Planets is just a bit lighter on characterization, and the

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Secret Organization of Good Guys we meet at the end is some unconvincing—but there's action and adventure aplenty. Again, one of the meatiest characters is an alien—this time a dragon with a Cockney accent named Sir Isaac Newton (the dragon, not the accent), who gets tiddly on maple syrup. The story centers around the maturation-process of Don Harvey, who, embroiled in events beyond his comprehension or control (the Revolt of Venus) is nevertheless able to consistently choose right action with insufficient data by following his heart—something I sincerely believe can be done.

I heartily recommend 'em both, with a slight edge to *Space Suit* because the villains were much more chillingly scary. In all fairness I must mention that the cover paintings for both (and, I'm dismally afraid, for the whole series) by Steele Savage just plain suck, in every imaginable aspect but particularly as regards accuracy (scientific *and* textual).

If you're a newcomer to SF, or if you missed these somehow, go back and check 'em out. They're part of the foundation of the greatest reputation in the business. And considering that the run of the mill goes for a buck and a half nowadays, these are a terrific bargain at $1.25.

* * *

A bunch of minireviews this month. Been that kinda month.

Pluribus by Michael Kurland—an After The Collapse novel. Nothing wrong with that: I'm writing one myself right now (for Berkely, and hopefully Putnam). This ambled along pleasantly, sometimes hilariously, keeping my interest—but it didn't seem to have gotten anywhere when I reached the end. Kurland won the mystery writers' Edgar for *A Plague of Spies* awhile back, and writes well, but he needed a theme. I like old Mordecai the Magician, but he was an easy character to draw, and he didn't seem to do much except survive. So did the horse that pulled his wagon.

The Swarm by Arthur Herzog—another of those mainstream SF attempts, with a plot out of the crackerjacks box and cookie-cutter characters. In the spavined tradition of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Herzog gives us the bees. Giant Swarms Of Killer Bees Threaten New York—oh God, why hast thou forsaken me, thy humble reviewer?

I must admit Herzog did his homework—a lot of research went into *Swarm* (this passes as "science content"). I must also admit that for a week after finishing it, I jumped ten feet in the air every time a bee flew past the outhouse, so it manifestly works as a chiller. But as a novel, as an SF novel, it's a dismal flop.

Science Past—Science Future by Isaac Asimov—the good doctor's (*is* he a good doctor? Does he do

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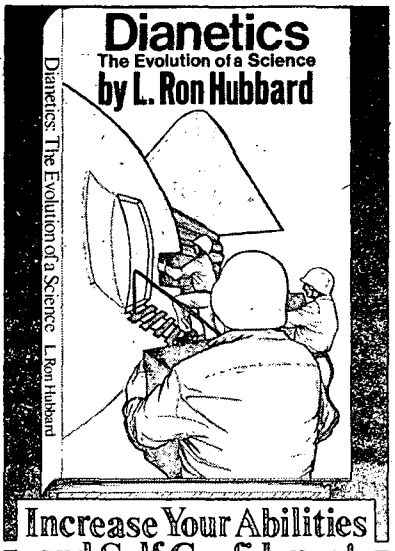
house-calls?) 160th published work (Good Christ!), bearing out the dust jacket's contention that "Dr. Asimov may himself be the solution to the energy crisis." This book is a collection of short-short science-popularization essays from sources like *Viva* and *TV Guide*—in brief, brief. None of the essays are from *F&SF*; none are in any particular depth. Topics range from the transistor to sex in space. Not bad at all.

Venus On The Half Shell, allegedly by Kilgore Trout—I picked this up on the stands out of amused curiousity, but I'm glad it was *Galaxy*'s money I spent on it. Pfeh. The funniest thing about it is the "picture of Kilgore Trout" on the back cover, and you can have that for free. I'm not sure, but I believe I heard somewhere that this was ghosted by Philip Jose Farmer [*It was.—Ed.*] but perhaps I have my hoaxes mixed, and I'd hate to pin this on anybody without proof. The copyright credit goes to Scott Meredith Literary Agency, and so they deserve all the scorn and contempt thereunto appertaining, I guess. Well worth missing—first recipient of the *Galaxative*, a monthly award for reverse excellence, which I hereby initiate as a regular feature. Shaped like a barbed-wire suppository, it will stand for all that is rotten in SF—and there ain't nothin' in the rules says there can't be more than one a month.

Later. ★



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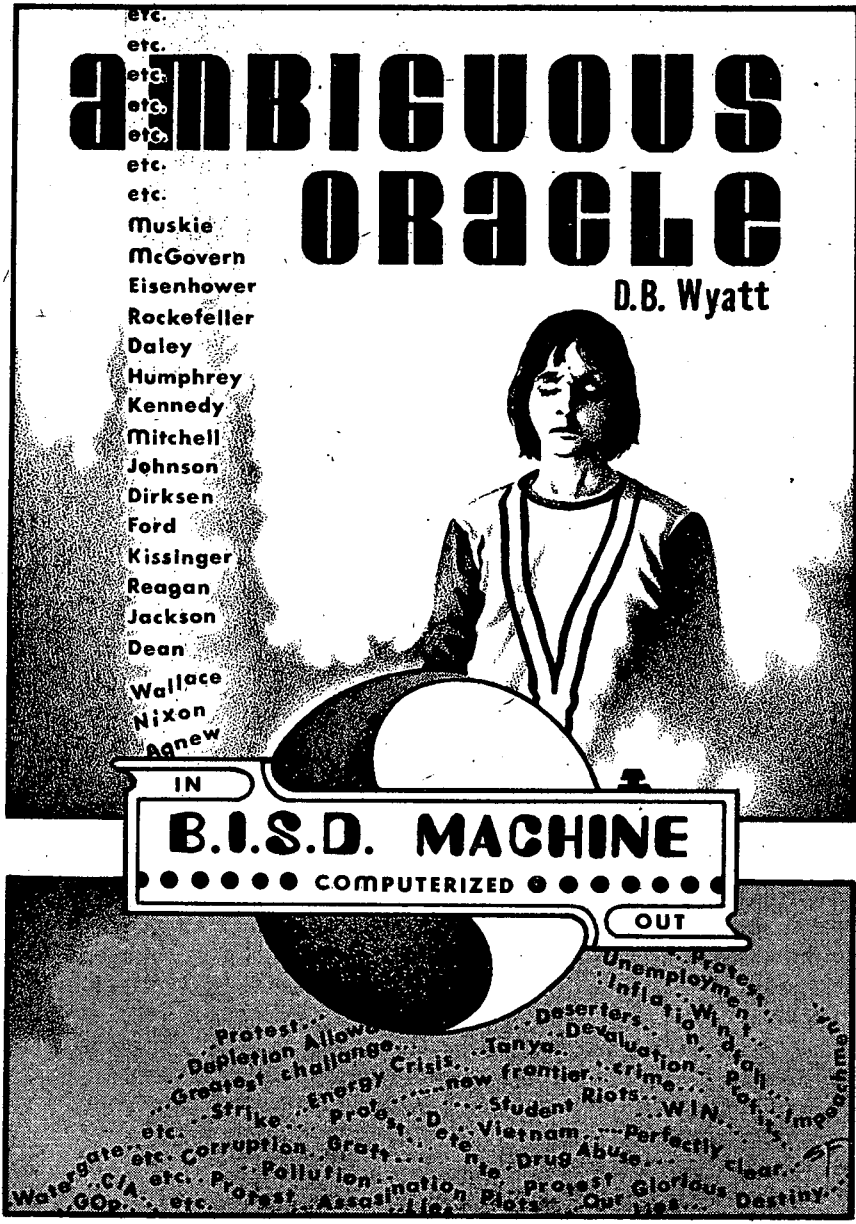
AMBIGUOUS ORACLE

D.B. Wyatt



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JIMMY WILLIAMS had been a cynic for as many of his thirteen years as he could remember.

Not that most children aren't born with a healthy and functional "Built-In Shit Detector," the *sine qua non* of cynicism in its purest form. But by the time they reach puberty, most children have been successfully trained in self-deception by their elders, and have learned that although a B.I.S.D. can never be shut off, it can be easily ignored with the aid of certain liquids, vapors and pills.

Jimmy, however, was plenty tough. It would be years before the bitter pain of being a one-eyed man in the country of the blind succeeded in blinding his eyes, gagging his mouth, and mortally wounding his self-respect. At the moment, the impassioned words of a larger-than-life senatorial candidate on the Screen filled him with an amused contempt.

"DEMOCRACY," boomed the phosphor-dot phantom, "IS RUN BY ALL, YET RUN DOWN BY MANY. THE SUBLIMELY OBVIOUS TRUTH THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL APPARENTLY IS NOT OBVIOUS ENOUGH FOR SOME. SEEING THEMSELVES AS A SORT OF POLITICAL ELITE, THESE ARROGANT ARTISTS OF ANARCHY WOULD PLACE THEMSELVES AND THEIR OWN OPINIONS ABOVE THE SACRED WILL OF THE PEOPLE, THE VIRILE, DRIVING FORCE WHICH DISTILLED THIS GREAT NATION OF OURS FROM THE CHAOS WHICH HAD GONE BEFORE. AS FOR . . ." Jimmy turned down the volume. ". . . myself, I can see no reason why I should be other than honored and proud to take the will of the people for my own, and subordinate my desires to those of the body politic. Indeed, it would be a rare . . ."

Jimmy's amusement and contempt were gradually giving way to an impatient irritability. The politician had ceased to be funny; was becoming odious.

"Screw it," he said aloud, and the Screen vanished, was replaced by the far wall of Jimmy's bedroom. He regarded the wall for a moment, wishing for the thousandth time that he could put up some sort of poster-type decoration on its blank grey surface without having to get up and remove the stuff every time he wanted to use the Screen. He had heard that next year's model would not be subject to molecular distortion as was this one—but he had also heard that Prosperity was Just Around the Corner. Jimmy believed only in what he could see—and damned little of that.

Right now, Jimmy wanted desperately to believe that his father would be coming home tonight. Sergeant William's Tac Squad had been called up at dawn to assist in quelling a riot in the Wyandanch Ghetto, involving some two or three

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thousand people, and an hour's monitoring of the newscasts had brought Jimmy nothing with any more calories than the democracy-loving politician.

That was bad.

Jimmy loved his father quite a bit, a fact which irritated him immensely whenever he became consciously aware of it. It annoyed him to love someone who was quite capable of ending an argument with, "There is no reason. Do it my way," particularly because experience had shown him that when his father said that, he nearly always turned out to be right. A *fiat* was galling; a correct and prudent *fiat* was maddening.

Perhaps what annoyed him the most, however, was that his father would accept, at times, the *fiats* of others—which seemed to Jimmy a kind of betrayal. The time Sgt. Williams had knuckled under to a meddling neighbor and a Town Zoning Board, obeying the order of the latter to tear down Jimmy's "nonconforming" tree-house, had nearly destroyed their relationship. The boy still did not understand his father's concept of duty, but on the night six months later when he had come home to find his father sprawled whitefaced on the living-room carpet, sobbing to Jimmy's mother of the slaughter he had done that day in society's name, Jimmy had learned that whatever the nature of this weakness, it was beyond his father's ability to fight.

Jimmy was determined to be tougher. Society gave him a pain behind the lap.

Democracy, he thought, remembering the politician who had annoyed him. *How can something sound so good and work out so lame?* The lad had recognized the politician's words as bullshit by their sound alone, but he could not have answered them as arguments. He had audited a reasonable number of Eyecon courses for a boy of his age, but he was too young to take Political Rhetoric just yet, and he had never cared enough to ask his father to help him get a waiver.

But the challenge appealed to him in his present state of mind.

Let's see, Jimmy thought. *First he talked about how all men are created equal. . . .*

That was a tricky one. Jimmy himself had some reason to believe that all men might be in fact created equal. Had he not himself been classified, at the age of three, as an "innate underachiever" by the Eyecon psychologists? And had he not, under the stimulus of his father's meaty right hand, gone on to achieve Magna Cum Laude status in his fourth, fifth and sixth years? "They tried to tell me you wasn't as good as everybody else," his father had whispered savagely to him once, when he was thought too young to understand, "but I say that's crap. Everybody gets the same chance to make something of themselves, and by God we're

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gonna prove it to 'em, you and me.''

And yet Jimmy also remembered his father saying once, ''What I do for my keep is my business, kid. What you do for your keep is mow the lawn. What do you think this family is, anyway, a democracy?''

Jimmy had been taking an Eyecon Sociology course at the time, and he had asked his real professor about his father's words during the question and answer period. The little grey man on the screen had closed his eyes and said tonelessly, ''Democracy is not a feasible form of government for a social group as small as the family. In a group of that size a single individual becomes a special-interest group—any two of them can become an unbeatable axis. It is in the vast numbers of people which characterize a viable democracy that individual interests and inadequacies cancel out, and the common good can . . .'' But at that point question and answer period ended, and the real professor's face was supplanted by the more familiar cartoon professor who couldn't hear you.

Now that Jimmy came to think of it, however, Eyecon had a sort of vested interest in democracy. The leap of companies like Eyeball Consolidated and Telemat from cable television franchises to complete information networks had been duplicated in the socialist countries of the world, but it had taken the free enterprise systems of America and Japan to create them in the first place. Their vast Screen empires and their shotgunning diversification had been sparked by competition, and only in a democracy is big-time competition open to more than a chosen few.

Perhaps it was no wonder that the real professor, one of the lucky few who had landed a job with a Screen company when the bottom fell out of the education market, was an apologist for democracy.

The hell with it, Jimmy thought. *I'll see if there's anything on the news now.* He was getting really worried about his father.

''. . . quality listing is given as highly unsatisfactory, so be sure to bring your mask along if you go outside today. Our weather-watch also informs us that today's radiation level readings throughout the tri-city area are 'no cause for alarm,' thanks to the valiant efforts of the Atomic Energy Commission's emergency crews. And now for a full report here is Snaker De Landro from Gardiner's Island.''

The moon-faced man on the wall was replaced by a lean, ascetic-looking man with straggly black hair and a goatee.

''Right, Wally. 'Valiant efforts' ain't no lie at all; I mean, these guys are really together out here, you know? The man says all you people on the other side of the Screen can pretty much walk around outside in street clothes if you want to, as long as the wind's northeast.

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And when it isn't, light body armor should be more than adequate.

"Look, lemme lay some background on ya, case ya forgot, all right? Maybe you remember the big hassle LILCo first had when they tried to go atomic, that Shoreham deal? They tried to tell everybody that a nuclear power plant on Long Island Sound was harmless t'the ecology. *Get bent*, we said, you and me, but before long it started to look like they was right when they said they couldn't keep our air-conditioners and Screens working without some big-ass plant *some*place. So we give 'em Gardiner's Island, and everybody's happy except maybe Gardiner, right? *Now* look what happens. Place is so close to the mainland you could row out there, and they can't run a power-line that don't break. Governor fails and BLOOIE!

"Well, what *I* want to know is when do I get my air-conditioning back? I mean, you people out there on the other side got—"

"Screw it," said Jimmy angrily, and Snaker De Landro was exorcised. *If all men are created equal, how come Eyecon's House-Hippie Newsman is such an idiot?*

Jimmy had seen Telemat's House Hippie, at the house of a friend whose parents subscribed to Eyecon's Japanese rival, and *he* hadn't sounded like a case of terminal brain damage. Perhaps that really was one of the advantages of a democracy, with the custard-heads being canceled out in the long run. In a totalitarian government, one idiot with a bent for power-collection could take over and rule for a lifetime—at least Jimmy's country shuffled the idiots every few years.

Why then did the system still seem to work so poorly?

Jimmy decided to ask the Brain.

"Brain?" he said.

The word "CODE" appeared on the Screen wall, with a question mark a second later.

Jimmy frowned. Tapping the brain required a surcharge authorization, and Jimmy's father was not aware that he knew the authorization-code.

He decided to settle that problem when the bill came.

"Wiliams 245T-Bridgeport 77-R . . ." he checked the calendar, " . . . 36D."

"WAITING," said the wall in foot-high computerscript.

"Input idiomatic English—same response mode," said Jimmy. That would keep it simple enough for him to understand.

"WAITING," the wall repeated. Eyecon's brain was flexible indeed, constituting one of the firm's biggest selling-points. To tap into the Eyecon grid was to gain access to a computer which was the equal of MENTOR in Washington, capable of accepting programs in nearly any known language, human or computer. The Eyecon System didn't just bring you entertainment

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and present you with shopping options at home or guard the house while you were elsewhere," it answered your questions for you, with the best answers available at the moment. Certain categories, of course, were restricted, and if the fail-safes caught a schoolboy tapping the brain for homework answers they doubled the bill for the course (" . . . right in the small print, sir, and you must agree it is for your own protection. . . "), but any legitimate query would be honored.

"Computer," said Jimmy ritually, "what, if anything, is inherently wrong with the democratic system of governing people?"

The computer answered.

Jimmy frowned. *Must be too many ambiguities to phrase it right in English* he thought. *Damn.* Jimmy's Fortran was not what it perhaps should have been.

But he tried just the same, using the instruction manual bolted to the Screen's operations console by his bed. The vocabulary barely included enough concepts to make his query intelligible; at least he would have the luxury of an idiomatic reply.

The second answer, being the same, pleased him no more than the first. He must be screwing up.

The hell with it, Jimmy thought, and switched to news so impatiently that he forgot to hit the "Clear" switch for the Brain first. A newscaster's excited features superimposed themselves over the Brain's computerscript answer, obscuring it. Jimmy sat up—this was it.

" . . . seen anything like it here at the Wyandanch Public Housing Complex. Last week's events pale into insignificance before the concentrated violence and savagery of this bitter confrontation. The body count so far as we can determine here in the field has already gone well above the previous record of 213, with the majority of them . . . uh . . . minority members. Heavier police firepower seems to have carried the day.

"But what the rioters lack in armament they make up for in ferocity. Of the 97 officers killed here today, 34 were literally torn to pieces when they were surprised outside the Interdicted Zone by a faction of radicals. Radical charges of police brutality are unverified at this time.

"Those interested in a casualty readout should activate channel 37, 19 or for those of you in outlying areas, channel 2K. Radical casualties on the left . . ." the 'caster grinned sardonically, " . . . and police casualties on the right."

Jimmy hastily slapped the 2K switch. The newscast shrunk inward, and lists of names began to march up the wall on either side of it. Torn to pieces!

His ears roared as the right hand list ended, scuttling up into the ceiling without having named his father. The roar eventually dopplered down into the 'caster's voice, calmer now.

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" . . . at hand is, of course, difficult to say at this time. The radicals, as usual, claim a moral victory, but it seems as if the central issue of today's demonstration, a step-up in garbage pickup to biweekly, will be denied them all the same. Housing Administrator Blasi has vowed 'never to knuckle under to armed dissent unless it should be in the interests of the Federal Public Housing Program.' So it seems there'll be no joy in the Wyandanch toni . . ."

The door of Jimmy's room opened; Sgt. Williams stood in the doorway, his uniform jacket unbuttoned and bloody. Jimmy started to kill the Screen, barely remembering in time to use his alternate cue. "Cease," he said, and the newscast ceased.

"Evening, son," said Sgt. Williams wearily. "How's it going on the home front?"

"Okay, Pop. How'd it go today?"

"Pretty rough. Kelly—you remember him?—caught a slug. Took his face clean off." Sgt. Williams looked at his boots, rubbed the doorframe as though it were his wife's shoulder. "When I think of what we went through, to keep a couple of politicians from losing face . . ." He shook his head. "But, I guess we gotta protect and preserve society, even the screwy parts, eh, Jimbo?"

"Guess so, Pop."

Sgt. Williams sighed, looked around the room. "What's this? Playing with the brain?"

Jimmy realized suddenly that the computer's last answer was waiting there on the wall for him to hit the "clear" switch, and breathed a blasphemy. Caught red-handed!

"Uh . . . yeah, Pop. I was just . . . fooling around." He waited for the explosion, already wondering what his punishment would be.

But the weary man in the doorway didn't seem to have an explosion in him. "Don't do that without asking, Jimmy. It's okay, I can see by the answer you got that you didn't cost us any money—no charge for nulls. But next time you might run up quite a bill, and your allowance won't cover it. Don't let it happen again, all right?"

He turned and walked from the room, but his muffled "Good night," got no response from Jimmy, for Jimmy had just realized in a blinding flash that his father was wrong, that they would get a bill for his questioning of the computer after all. The Brain had not refused to answer, it had simply answered as correctly and concisely as it knew how.

For Jimmy had asked it:

"What is wrong with the democratic form of government?"

And the Brain, apparently considering computerman's slang as idiomatic, had answered; "G.I.G.O."—that is, "garbage in, garbage out." ★

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STEVEN UTLEY

GETTING AWAY

THERE WERE soft-bodied creatures in endless variety and profusion on the bottom, and tentacled shellfish, odd orange scorpions, trilobites, grotesque wrigglers that looked like armored centipedes, an occasional fish, all grim mouth and dull eyes peering out of bone-rimmed sockets. There were clumps of pallid plants with segmented stems, rising like columns from the mud to support the rippling, translucent ceiling of the pond. Beyond the ceiling was a fuzzy-edged sun.

Devonian dreams. I woke up and went under again, and this time there were blue glacial cliffs on the horizon. Much closer, there was the stench of tar and decaying flesh. The setting sun made molten silver of the rain water standing on the surfaces of the tar pools. Irregular lumps lay in some of the pools. Here and there could be seen a curved tusk; a not unrecognizably decomposed forepaw with long, hooked claws; a partially consumed hump of a half-submerged bison. Condors and jackals were everywhere, and I was with them.

Pleistocene images. I woke up and got out of bed. It was my day to fix breakfast.

This is my one real luxury, you understand—this journal, these precious sheets of paper. I indulged myself last week and paid through the nose for a hardbound book of blank pages. Two hundred sheets of paper, four hundred sides on which to record my every vagrant thought. Paper for which I have no nobler purpose in mind than Dear Diarying.

Welcome to page 2 of The Book Of Bruce Holt, who'll probably be dead before he gets close to page 400.

* * *

"Why always dinosaurs and things like that?" asks Carol, the woman with whom I have been living. "And why always poems about 'the moment of extinction,' as you put it here?"

I am munching my toast and sipping my tepid soyva. Carol is leaning against the kitchenette's disposal

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unit, fanning herself with the carbon slate I use for first drafts and notes.

"That's what I see," I tell her. "Dinosaurs and things like that. That's what comes to me."

"It's all so damned depressing. You're getting that way in your stories, too."

"It's a natural reaction against the pap I write for television."

"That pap keeps food on the table."

I make a short, sharp chuckling noise—I am not so old that I do not remember real bread, real coffee—and force down the last of my breakfast, then fish in my shirt pocket for a cigarette. That last remark of Carol's has gotten to me, since it's true. My stories are fitful sellers. Too depressing for most people. Television keeps me going, and television wants optimism. Or, at the very least, sheer escapism. Old Jack Woodford's formula for commercial fiction is a timeless one. Boy Meets Girl, Girl Gets Boy Into Pickle, Boy Gets Pickle Into Girl.

"I'm going downtown today," I say after a while. "Do you want me to pick up anything for you?"

Carol shakes her head slowly. "I can't think of anything. I may try to get into the commissary while you're out. I could make dinner tonight."

"It's my day to cook."

"It'll give me something to do."

"Finished reading your book?"

She uses her fingernail to trace a line across the bottom of the carbon slate. "I don't care for it much. Camus depresses me the same way you do."

"Always nice to hear that I've made it into Camus' league." I take my first long puff on the cigarette and wonder what in hell they've begun using to cut the tobacco. "Come on, Carol, what would you prefer that I wrote poems about? Babbling brooks and blue skies? None left, in the event it's escaped your notice."

"Don't be nasty, Bruce. And there aren't any dinosaurs left, either, so *touché* to you."

I let the matter drop, because the power is suddenly uncoiling in the back of my skull, and I'm sliding away from her, into the first available mind: some woman named Sharon Kraft, who lives in the heart of the Nashville metroplex, in an apartment even smaller than ours. It's extremely cold in Sharon Kraft's room, and the single dirty window is frosted over on the outside. I, sweltering in August heat, have gone to her at the height of some recent winter. I didn't know Sharon Kraft before this moment, didn't know of her, and all I get from her during the four or five seconds that I'm in her is the usual stuff, flashes about food and money. Couched in leaden anxiety.

Carol slaps the carbon slate down on the table before me. *"Don't do that when I'm talking to you!"*

I snap out of it, rescue the slate

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from the toast crumbs, mutter an apology.

"You're *always* retreating from me like that!" Carol goes on, her voice rising up the scale. "That's all you ever use it for, isn't it? Things get touchy, and you go flying away into your little world for the duration."

I am trying not to let her irritation infect me. It's too hot for arguments. I offer her a drag off my cigarette. She shakes her head vehemently.

"Look," I say, forcing myself to speak calmly, soothingly, "I didn't ask for it. It just happened. I'm stuck with it, Carol."

"*Stuck* with it! You make it sound like a clubfoot!"

"Carol, honey, I have to get along with it the best I can."

"Then why don't you use it to make things better for us?"

"What do you want me to do? Go back and find out where Captain Kidd buried his loot?"

"I don't care what you do, but do *something*."

Carol has begun pacing back and forth in the kitchenette, three steps that way, three steps back. When she realizes that I'm not going to say another word, that I have no intention of scrapping with her, she stalks out of the kitchenette and wanders in a loose circle around the apartment's main room, touching the spines of my little library of tattered paperbounds, glaring at the chipped plastic chessmen (still locked in last week's Mexican stand-off). And I sit trying to think of something to say which might restore me to her good graces.

But the rent is due next week, and my check from the studio is late, and she's bored and feels useless because she can't find a job, and I am convenient to blame, because I have the power. I have the extra Something that most people don't have. I have the gift. And it isn't doing us any good. And so. . . .

And so I give up and carefully snuff out the cigarette in a clay ashtray, then deposit the tobacco from the butt in a Mason jar half-filled with previous savings. The best I can do is stay out of Carol's way for a while.

Still, I can't help being a little annoyed. We've been through this before, and you'd think that by now Carol would have accepted my limitations. How many times do I have to tell her that I can't *make* the extra Something *do* anything?

It comes. It goes. I have no control over it, none at all. Time snatches me out of my own head and takes me where it will. I can never say where I'm liable to end up, and, once there, I can't do anything except observe the goings-on through the eyes, ears and/or other sensory organs of whatever creature makes itself available to me. Watching trilobites through the eyes of (I presume) lungfish is not going to make me rich.

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Oh, but I tried. I did try.

When I first started having these chronopathic flashbacks, I dismissed them as nightmares and waking dreams. Then came the doubts about my own sanity, the sessions with a psychiatrist, the numbing terror of madness. It wasn't until Dr. D. M. Mayes, of the University of Texas right here in Austin, issued his report that the nature of my affliction became obvious. Temporal dislodgement. Chronopathy. How much better I felt once I knew the name of my disease. How nice to hear that there were dozens like me.

The last I heard, they still didn't understand just *how* the human mind could travel through time. If physicists were baffled by the mechanics of telepathy, clairvoyance and telekinesis, they were absolutely infuriated by chronopathy, which brazenly refuted much that they held dear about the nature of Time and Space. But I have my own theory to explain *why*.

I think it was triggered by despair. Maybe chronopathy has always been latent in people, manifesting itself on occasion and giving rise to conjecture about ghosts and reincarnation. But the manifestations have become more widespread during the last quarter of this century. And I think it's due to an overwhelming sense of hopeless oppression in a worsening environment. People lost all faith in the future. Unhappy in the present, they longed for the past, ached for it, because it always looked rosier, simpler, easier.

Thus were the shackles within the human psyche struck off.

So, anyway, at age thirty-eight, I turned out to be chronopathic. Learning to live with it wasn't easy, but I've managed. I guess.

Once, I even sought out Mayes and offered my services. But he had already assembled a team of chronopaths, men and women whose abilities were finely honed, who had all of the necessary paleon-, archeo- and anthropological schooling to complement their talents. I was untrained. I had no control over my power.

I was, in short, a semi-gifted amateur, a layman, a hack writer and minimally successful poet to boot.

We appreciate your thinking of us in this regard, Mr. Holt, but. . . .

Not suitable for present needs. Terrific. The story of my life.

* * *

Last night, I watched from the crowd as Louis XV went under the blade. You should have seen the expression on his face, dear diary. He really did not believe that we'd go through with it. Right up to the moment that the executioner dropped the blade, he refused to accept the reality of the situation, and then, just as the blade began to fall, I saw him crane his head up as far as it would go. I would have sworn

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that I saw his lips form the words, *Mon Dieu*.

Ah well. Where did I leave off in the continuing saga of Bruce and Carol?

The other day, while I was waiting for her to get over her mad, I put my ancient Olympia portable on the table and got to work on the latest installment of my TV soap opera. I was halfway down the page when Carol bumped into something and made a lot of unnecessary noise on her way to the john. She was, I'm certain, deliberately trying to provoke me. But I settled back in my chair, closed my eyes and felt myself leaving again.

When I got there, the sky was overcast, and warm rain was falling. The low clouds had a faint greenish tinge. I crouched in a snug hole on the face of a cliff that dropped straight down into the sea. My niche stank of rotting fish and excrement, but the stench did not cut too sharply. My host's sense of smell seemed atrophied. However, even in this murk, its vision was exceptional—the only other time I had ever experienced such incredible clarity of vision was the time I rode along with what must have been one of the very last eagles.

The rain ceased by and by. My host—no, *I*—stirred and stretched pathetic little hindlegs to restore circulation, unfurled wings that were membraneous and covered with a fine down. The wings were braced by an enormously elongated digit. I

SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW

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Issue #14 features a long, eye-opening "inside" double interview with Philip Jose Farmer detailing his use of the Kilgore Trout by-line, his writing of VENUS ON THE HALF-SHELL, his hard-to-find sex novels, his troubles with publishers, his forthcoming books and his dark view of our planet's future.

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now knew what, when and probably where I was.

Pterosaur, Cretaceous Period. By the inland sea of Kansas, perhaps.

I waited until the updraft from the sea felt *right*, and then I gently kicked away from the face of the cliff, dipped, rose and was airborne.

I had the sky all to myself.

Eventually, my host brought us lower and skimmed along above the waves, watchful of silver shadows just below the surface. My long, toothless beak dipped in suddenly and scooped up a thrashing fish which went down my gullet whole.

Then my host climbed, still the only creature in the sky. The sun was starting to slide below the horizon. I could not escape the feeling that this might indeed be the last evening of all, that I had happened upon the very last of the dragons. I had come to the Mesozoic Era many times before, I had been Gorgosaurus and Plateosaurus, I knew my way around in the Age of Dinosaurs. But something was different now. The land, sea and sky looked as they had always looked on my previous visits to Late Cretaceous times, my host flew on as though nothing were strange, but I knew, I knew, that aerial reconnaissance of the land to the east would reveal it to be empty of giants. There was only my host, gliding silently toward what I had, in a poem, termed "the moment of extinction." It seemed an invasion of privacy to remain and witness this final pterodactyl's fall, so I pulled away and got on with my typing.

I had a severe headache when I was finished at the typewriter. Carol had subsided to the point where she could collapse on the sofa-bed with *The Stranger*. But she was flipping the pages angrily. She had noticed my unoccupied meat.

I went over to her and got very tender and caressing and so forth, and we were back on more or less friendly terms after about thirty minutes. We realized that we hadn't had our last falling out about the extra Something, but we were all cuddly and content for the time being, the storm had passed, we could look forward to a little peace before the subject again reared its head.

And in such moments I really, keenly regret that I am not better with my words. The Mesozoic always does that to me, makes me want to talk to Carol about what it was like to have been a young man back during the Sixties and earliest Seventies, when it looked as though there might be hope for humanity . . . when blacks were suddenly demanding the right to be people, when women were demanding the right to be human beings, when . . . when so many different voices were being raised, crying out for sanity and justice, when there were good and noble causes, worthy causes, when there was still time and the future that has come to pass was still a small, gray cloud hanging low on the horizon, when. . . .

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When the smell of extinction was not in the air.

But I can't make it live for Carol. She's too young. She was born after things had already gone to hell in a hand-basket. She was barely out of diapers when California broke up. (Goodbye, L.A. You always fascinated me.) She was just a kid when Texas made its abortive attempt to divide itself into five separate states, and as far as Carol is concerned, Texas has always been occupied by enemy troops.

Carol came too late, after there was no longer any place for hope in our lives. And I have never been able to explain to her the essential difference between the poor dumb earnest optimism of my youth and the inanely glowing stuff I write for TV.

Carol, Carol, dinosaurs and all their brethren were majestic creatures. How much so, you will never be able to understand, because you can't be told about it. You have to *feel* what it was like to be twenty meters long and the lord of the world. Or to glide on six-meter wings above the Kansas Sea. The dinosaurs were the most awesome things of all time, mountains made to walk. And, for all of their cranial density, Carol, they were nobler monsters than men. When the dinosaurs died, they left a clean world. They walked out of the world, and it was still full of living things. The dinosaurs died out gracefully.

When we die out, we'll take the whole world with us, one way or another.

* * *

I have such a mind for trivia. All morning long, I've been haunted by a song which I can't possibly have heard during the past twenty years. It's something from the Sixties, I think, something by Bob Dylan. A cry of anguish, of disillusionment. "Oh, mama, can this really be the end, to be stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again?"

And this, from one of the stanzas: " . . . the ladies treat me kindly, and they furnish me with tape, but deep inside my heart, I know I can't escape."

Oh, but I try.

Today is Friday, Food Day at the commissary, and the streets are packed. I had to go to the studio. Pushed and fought my way to the mass-transit stop at the corner, and then the steam-bus was twenty minutes late. But it did arrive, and I did get a seat up front. It was a miserable ride, all the same. My respirator has sprung a leak. (God, who'd have thought that Austin, Texas would ever have really *bad* smog?) The day was a scorcher, and everything stank, the bus, the streets, the people, the whole city. The smell of extinction.

And so I leaned my head back, closed my eyes and got away from then as best I could. All is calm, all is bright. ★

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DIRECTIONS

Dear Mr. Baen,

The words WE INVITE LETTERS at the end of Directions struck a responsive chord this month and so, this letter.

Your note in your reply to Philip M. Cohen's letter ("For some reason, subs. have increased enormously in the last year or so. . ."); that, sir, is good news for not only *Galaxy* but for the entire SF field. After *IF* died and *Vertex* shuddered to a near standstill (newsprint/tabloid format), [*Vertex has since folded. Ed.*], I was rather anxious for the SF magazine field. But things are looking up, particularly with *Galaxy*. The reason for the increase in subs. to *Galaxy* is simply put: *Quality* editing presenting Quality SF.

After the era of Fred Pohl, *Galaxy* and *IF* were, to be charitable, shoddy. However, with the advent of your regime, *Galaxy* has moved rapidly toward the top of the SF magazine field. You have my heartfelt congratulations for your fine work.

Most letters end at this point, but something has nagged at me for some time and here it is: Why is SF continually placed at the bottom of the literary world?

Years ago (1959 or so) when acquaintances would see me reading Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land,* I would hear the old: "Jeeze! How can you stand to read that—space opera-monster junk—(just plain) junk—drivel and s--t?" I'd grin and tell 'em I read it because it was interesting, basically well written and, well, it had ideas, concepts and settings that mainstream literature just did not contain. Sniggering at my juvenile tastes, they would saunter off.

Ten years later the same people were telling *me* about "grokking", "water brothers" and all the *new* ideas they had just discovered. I sniggered a bit and read onward. It never ceases to astound me how many of the "now" and "today" views of the world are old hat to us SF readers. Von Daniken? Unique? Unusual? Mind boggling? Not a bit of it! Most of the concepts presented in that mish-mash, *Chariots of the Gods* were explored, dissected and hurled onto the trash heap of SF cliché years ago. The "crazy" ideas of SF are now being discussed by many who would never admit that they had ever considered reading that "junk" SF. This paradox of general acceptance of old SF concepts as new, thrilling ideas while denigrating the field that generated them bothers the hell out of me! "Low" form literature this SF, but the ideas are neat, just don't admit where they originated! Egad!

Another point of interest is the continual idea-production of SF. Let's face it, SF keeps you *interested*—in our world (past, present and future) and (this is where the mainstream is left light years behind) in the situations of other worlds, their people, problems and culture. The growing popularity and acceptance of SF among the general readership (those who were mainstreamers until they "saw the light") indicates that the human brain has not become totally mired in *today*; we're still reading beyond our everyday world, looking not just for escape, but for enlightenment and knowledge. SF does aid us in our thinking; I've learned more about science from reading SF than from all the dull science textbooks of my high school and college days. Which brings me to Dr. A. Meyer's letter, to wit: Bull! (For the most part.)

I can agree with his assertion that SF, though it can exist happily without literary values *cannot exist without absolute values*

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in part only. SF contains certain absolute values which make it SF. But to exist without literary values? I think not, Dr. Meyer. He is horrendously mistaken when he states ". . .literary elegance is merely gilding refined gold."

Good Grief! Granted, SF does have "absolute values" (suspension of disbelief, literature of ideas, etc.) and to those of us who read it regularily, it is refined gold; but to say that literary values are unimportant to SF—that's just absurd.

Science *Fiction*—that second word is *important*! There is good fiction and bad fiction; there is probably nothing worse than bad science fiction. In SF both the science and the fiction must be integrated, but both must be presented well in order for it to be successful. That's what makes it so challenging to write and exciting to read.

Delaney, Sturgeon, Heinlein, Silverberg, Zelazny, Bester, Pohl, Andersen, Le Guin (the list is almost endless) all write excellent fiction and it makes their science fiction *move*, become real and have meaning.

Characterization, plotting and the other concepts of fiction must be observed if our favorite literary form is to remain viable. If Dr. Meyer doubts the value of fiction concepts in SF, I would refer him to Ben Bova's article in the August 1975 *Writer* "Plot in Science Fiction", an excerpt from his forthcoming book *Notes to a Science Fiction Writer*. Or he could examine *Science Fiction: Today and Tomorrow*, an entire book, edited by Reginald Bretnor, dedicated to the science *and* the fiction in SF.

The field is becoming more fulfilling daily; concepts and techniques are achieving an excellence that will insure the survival of SF as vibrant, far reaching and respected literature.

I see I have stomped my soapbox into splinters with this tirade and the hour is getting late.

Once again my sincerest congratulations.

Sincerely,
Craig W. Anderson

1240 Vallerand Rd.
Tracy, Ca. 95376

Dear Mr. Baen,

Galaxy is the last magazine in the world in which you'd find a schematic diagram trying to pass as fiction. *Analog*, sure, occasionally; even F & SF once published one. But *Galaxy*? I've been reading it for two years, and the worst of the stories were still stories.

Not any more.

I'm referring, of course, to Hayford Peirce's nonstory "High Yield Bondage". The rickety "story" that surrounds this article should have been removed, and what was left published as a non-fact article. It was mildly amusing, but a failure as straight fiction.

And where do you get off limiting Alter to three pages, cutting him off when he was just starting? Geis' Alter-Ego is picking up a lot of fans out here, and we'll kick and scream till Alter gets his way. What harm can he do reviewing books?

"Nobody Here but Us Shadows": This is one of the best short stories you've published in your editorship so far. The ideas are well-worn, but Lundwall uses them in a totally original manner. I hope he makes further appearances in *Galaxy*.

Keep up the (usually) good work. You just might break up *Analog's* monopoly on Hugos.

Sincerely,
Christopher DeVito

Thank you . . . but not this year; Ben is still #1 in the hearts of fandom. (Congratulations, Mr. Bova on your third—in a row, yet!—Hugo.)

Dear Mr. Baen,

I have recently read my first two issues of *Galaxy*, the April 1975 and June 1975 issues. I want to write to thank you for restoring my faith in science-fiction.

A curious statement, you think. In my teens I was a heavy science-fiction fan. I didn't have much money, but most of what I got went to science-fiction books. Arthur C. Clarke was my idol. (He still is, but Ursula K. Le Guin is giving him some stiff competition.)

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Then I joined the Marine Corps and I read almost no science-fiction from *Dune* until *The Gods Themselves*. I was, among other things, discovering philosophy and history. But, it was science-fiction also that kept me off science-fiction!

Suddenly, it seemed, science-fiction had become "socially relevant" and sold its soul to the peace-love-dope-anti-war-anti-establishment youth cultures. Of course, this wasn't totally true for all science-fiction, but it seemed whenever I went to the bookshelves, the books all seemed to be promising to be bigger put-downs "reflecting the social ills today projected to their terrifying possibilities".

I bought a few. A few too many! Science-fiction had also decided to become intellectual art! But what a strange definition of art these new stories had. Gone were such hack features like plot, characterization, and realistic dialogue. Chaos seemed to reign and its queen was unintelligible symbology. I dislike bad literature. Science-fiction as art had become bad literature.

Recently I have read *Orbit 7, Orbit 12, Nova 3,* and a few other such anthologies. There was less chaos and mystic symbology, but I was appalled at the pessimism! Of all those stories, not five left Earth. Nearly everyone of those stories foretold a dismal future of ruin or choking population. Human life was pictured as bare, helpless survival—an existance made horrible by mindless bureaucracy and heartless technology and devoid of dignity.

I wondered where science-fiction's star-spanning vision had gone. I recalled how meaningless President Kennedy's challenge to reach the moon by 1969 was to me until *A Fall Of Moondust* by Arthur C. Clarke gave me the vision—the *meaning*!—of what this first flight would mean and could eventually bring about. These stories I had been reading would not inspire a young mind to anything unless it would be to the dismal hopelessness of striving for future goals.

Of course, pessimism is as valid as optimism, but I wondered if all science-fiction had given up to pessimism with only a few reactionary hold-outs like Clarke, Asimov, Le Guin, and Norton. About this time I bought my first two issues of *Galaxy*, plus some of the competition. I found again science-fiction that is both good literature and out among the stars.

I learned through your magazine that science-fiction's star-spanning vision is alive and well between your covers. Congratulations! You've just won a steady buyer.

Thank you,
G. Richard Bozarth
HQ BN COMM CO. Maint.
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FPO San Francisco, CA. 96602

Frankly I have a certain fondness for peace, love, youth et al., and am a bit of an anti-establishmentarian in the bargain—but I do believe that if life isn't worth living. . .what's the point?

Sir:

There are many things in this world that I do not understand. Right now I'm having much trouble understanding the people in the science-fiction field. You people have made me ashamed to admit that I have been reading SF for 40 of my 49 years. The reason being you have changed SF from science-fiction to sex fantasy.

What is this? Sex isn't something new. It has been written about and talked about, had its picture photographed, painted, drawn, sculpted, scratched and smeared on so many things nobody could miss it. But not here please. That is not why I subscribe to your magazine.

I know your writers need a lot of freedom to move ideas around in and to express things in new ways, but "freedom isn't free". You have a responsibility to me and others like me. If you want to print and sell all that trash, fine! Just be sure to change the title of your magazine so we will know before we invest. I have spent no less than a hundred dollars this year trying to find science-fiction that isn't obsessed with sex.

Sex is not a spectator sport to me. If I can't participate I'm not going to pay money

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to watch someone else. If I can't find science-fiction I won't settle for sex fantasy. Put up or shut up! Produce science-fiction or get out of the business.

With deepest regrets
Ray L. Stouff

7820 Emerald Hills Way
Smithfield, Texas 76080

Dear Jim,

Virgil Hays has criticized you for printing BE YE PERFECT, by M. A. Barter. Mr. Hays feels you should "knock off the crap and get back to science fiction." What does he think sex is? A thing to be put in *Playboy*, and conveniently forgotten when it comes to sf? No. As long as you are printing a story with two sexes involved, there either has to be or should be interaction between them. Not to advocate porno, but to demand a credible story. Even a moron could see that, the story being based on a society in which sex is a chore instead of a pleasure, there must be a reference to sex, or the encounter written up.

Let me ask those of you who agree with Mr. Hays—What's your hangup? I am perfectly willing to read a story in which there is some sort of sex involved—PROVIDED it is relevant to the story. Why is it you object to sex in a story? Why is it you want to censor stories like the one in question?

And you Jim, why do you print drivel like that? B*n B*v* at *N*L*G has been through it already, and so have we readers, so why give these nerds a forum to shout from?

Sincerely,
Geoff Beckman

2589 Norfolk Rd.
Cleveland Hts., OH 44106

Partly to see if I can elicit contrary responses such as your own, and partly because, well, I do try to provide a forum for many divergent points of view.

Dear Mr. Baen,

As a year-old subscriber, I enjoy *Galaxy* quite a bit, especially Dick Geis (a friend of mine), Jerry Pournelle's articles (which really make me think), and the short stories. This is only personal opinion, because I know many readers enjoyed it, but I do not place "Sign of the Unicorn" high on my list. I never have felt that serials have a place in *any* magazine. They are, to me, much like trying to watch a good movie on t.v. with too damn many commercials—the length in between episodes does the story no good. The latest serial, HELIUM, suffered from a bad case of too many characters. Though not a writer, one thing I always remembered from college was "don't get too many characters in your story" unless you can really develope them as Frank Herbert did his in DUNE. I would like to put in a vote for two-part or one-part serials. By one part, I mean none at all. But, I shall still read on as long as your quality remains as it has been since you took over.

Very sincerely,
Gerald L. Blucher

2065 S. E. 158th Ave.
Portland, OR 97233

Thank you. Personally I thought the characters in HELIUM were extremely well delineated. I guess some people like Dickensian type fiction—and others don't!

Dear Mr. Baen,

By all means, publish Roger Zelazny's fourth Amber novel—and by the way, Darnay's *Helium* was probably the best serial printed in *Galaxy* within the last three years.

Also, Dick Geis's "Alien Viewpoint" column has contained some of the funniest material on SF that I've seen for several years. However, the irregularity of the column can be disappointing at times. Do you plan to have Alter return in the next few issues?

Cordially,
John S. Kelly

70-A Farmers Avenue
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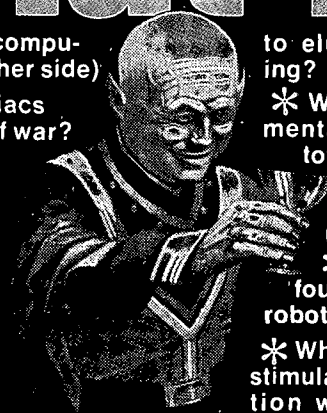

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